THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

The God who Speaks with/out Words

The Philosophical Problem of Revelation in Contemporary Muslim Theology

by:

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(who has been known to save only those who do not save themselves, including himself)

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

presented to:

The Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies,
School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures,
University of Edinburgh

February, 2019

Declaration of Authorship

1. I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

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   An early version of some parts of this work has been accepted to be published as a book chapter entitled "Soroush's Theory of Qur'anic Revelation: A Historical–Philosophical Appraisal," in *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Iran,* ed. Allesandro Cancian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Forthcoming).

Signed:

Date:

ای خدا جان را تو بنما آن مقام

کاندر آن بی حرف می‌روید کلام

That place to my soul, God, won't you disclose
Where speech without a word is born and grows

Rumi, *the Masnavi*
(I: 3105), Mojaddedi's translation

Abstract

This thesis explores the philosophical problem of divine revelation in contemporary Muslim theology by focusing critically on the works of 'Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) an Iranian philosopher, modern theologian, and public intellectual. In a nutshell, the philosophical problem of divine revelation, as specifically related to Islam, centres around making sense of the paradox of the *transcendent* God who has supposedly spoken *like human beings*, mainly through the Qur'an. While God is, by definition, the meta-historical Being, the Qur'an is taken to be a book that at least partially reacts to historical events, and therefore not a meta-historical entity. To solve this problem, Soroush argues that the Qur'an, in both content and form, is literally a Muhammadan speech, and only figurately divine speech. Soroush also argues that the Qur'anic speech of Muhammad is, phenomenologically, dreamlike in nature. In this thesis I argue that Muslim theories of revelation can be divided into internalist and externalist theories. While internalist theories recognize, at least in principle, the agency of the prophet in the process of revelation, the externalists refrain from doing so. The Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation is one of the most radical internalist theories of revelation in which the full agency in the process of revelation is given to Muhammad. I also argue in this thesis that the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation seems to be positioned in the middle between realism and irrealism. For realists, God, as independent being, can be known and talked about cognitively (i.e. in a way that is capable of being true or false). For irrealists, which come in various forms however, either independent God does not exist (ontological anti-realism), or God's existence or non-existence cannot be known (epistemological anti-realism), or talk of God is not cognitive (non-realism). I argue that while Soroush claims that his theory of religion is realistic, it seems more like a hybrid position between realism and irrealism which at the end laps into irrealism or ends up being not far from it. Specifically, his theory of the Qur'anic revelation seems irrealistic. His theory of religion at the end, then, seems inconsistent: it claims to be realistic but seemingly it is not finally so.

Lay Summary

Can God (of Islam) speak as humans speak? If God can, then God is like one of us and not at all, or at least not totally, beyond us (not transcendent). And if God cannot speak, then from whence comes the scripture (in Islam: the Qur'an)? This is simply the philosophical problem of revelation. This thesis explores this problem through the prism of 'Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) an Iranian philosopher, modern theologian, and public intellectual. Soroush argues that God is so beyond us that God does not speak in human form. He concludes that the Qur'an is actually the word of Muhammad and not the word of God, or only figuratively the word of God. Soroush then gives all credit to Muhmmad in producing the Qur'an, while all the credit that God receives is that God created Muhmmad as prophet. In this thesis, I argue that on the one hand Soroush claims in his theory of religion that religions are supposed to represent—in one way or another—God, but on the other hand the Soroushian theory of God (his theology), and specifically his theory of the Qur'anic revelation, end up ruling out the religious representation of God.

Notes on Transliteration

I have used a simplified version of the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES). All diacritical marks have been omitted but *ʻayn* and *hamz* have been retained.

Acknowledgment

Among those who have kindly contributed directly to this study, I would like to express my deep appreciation, first and foremost, to my principal supervisor professor Andrew J. Newman, who provided valuable and extensive comments on each and every draft of this research. I am also grateful to my second supervisor professor Duncan Pritchard, whose meticulous comments on the philosophical parts of this research helped me sharpen my arguments. I am also thankful to professor Hugh Goddard for his encouragement in the short period of time that he acted as my third supervisor. I will always remember and appreciate my deceased supervisor Dr Michael Purcell (1956-2013). Needless to say, that despite all help from my supervisors, the probable errors and oversights remaining are entirely my own.

I must also express my deepest gratitude to Dr 'Abdolkarim Soroush and his son Dr Hossein Dabbaq. I would like to acknowledge Dr Arash Naraghi, Dr Malkin Su, Dr Daryoush Mohammad Poor, Simon Loynes, Neil Russell, and Lucy Deacon for their various instances of help and support. As the first recipient of the 'Muhammad Arkoun Doctoral Scholarship', without which it would not have been possible for me to undertake this study, I should like to express my warmest thanks to the Institute of Ismaili Studies, and the family of the late professor Muhammad Arkoun.

Finally, I would like to thank my devoted parents, Narges Khatoun and Seyed Hussein for all their kindnesses and support, and also my lovely and angelic wife, Reihaneh Haghbin who kindly supported and encouraged me during my long study at various stages. Our first daughter, Sophia, has always been a source of love and inspiration for me. Kimia, our second daughter, joined us towards the end of this long intellectual journey. I end with special thanks to Sophia, Kimia and their mother who are the beacons of my life.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Main Aim of the Study

In this study I intend to analyse and philosophically criticize the way in which one of the most important modern Muslim (from a Twelver Shi'i background) Iranian philosophers, theologian and public intellectual, Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) has radically rethought and criticized the traditional understanding of the Qur'anic revelation.

According to the traditional—sometimes referred to as the 'orthodox'— *Verstehen* of Muslim divine revelation, the Qur'an is the verbatim word of God *simpliciter*. Soroush has tenaciously criticized this widespread understanding of revelation suggesting a radically alternative theory. According to this alternative theory, the words as well as the meanings of the Qur'an are to be literally attributed to Muhammad as the prophet of God, and only figuratively to the God of Islam.

In order to philosophically grasp the Soroushian theory of revelation, this study draws on the conceptual framework which is taken from the contemporary philosophy of science and epistemology: realism (direct or indirect), irrealism (antirealism or non-realism), and a hybrid position. Simply put: according to realism, humans' understanding of independent reality, at least in successful cases, is essentially dependent upon reality itself, and not significantly shaped by our cognitive apparatus. But according to irrealism, one cannot talk of independent reality, since either reality of the sort under the discussion does not exist, or what is characterized as reality is, in one way or another, inescapably dependent upon us. A hybrid position, however, takes a middle position that although unlike irrealism there might be an independent reality, and we, as cognitive agents, have an understanding of it, but our understanding is at least directly shaped by elements independent of that reality and dependent upon us (unlike at least direct realism).

In this sense one can be realist or irrealist in any domain of human knowledge. For example, one can be (direct or indirect) realist in mathematics, claiming that mathematical truths are 'discovered', while mathematical irrealists believe they are 'invented.' Another paradigmatic example is perceptual knowledge: direct realists about perception defends this position that "[a]ll perceptual awareness [in veridical cases] is *direct* awareness of a surface of a material body"

(emphasis and parenthesis added).[1] But according to perceptual irrealists (in this case sometimes called idealists), our perceptions cannot be explained by appealing to the physical world (either because the physical world does not exist or even if it exists we have no access to it). The indirect realistic position (in this case sometimes called 'representative realism') holds that although veridical perceptions are to be explained in virtue of having a connection to the external (i.e. the physical) world, this connection is not direct but mediated through the subjective sensory experience representing the external world.[2]

When it comes to religion, indirect realism holds that although there is something objectively divine out there (or up there) our understanding of it is always shaped through mediations—be it culture, tradition, human's cognitive apparatus and so on. Religious direct realism however takes the position that at least one religion can come up with the veridical direct or semi-direct perception of God, while religious irrealism goes so far as to state that the claim to the very existence of independent divine reality and its features are thoroughly shaped only by culture and history.

I shall argue in detail in this research that it seems to be the case that on the one hand, the Soroushian philosophical theory of the Qur'anic revelation can be better understood if categorized and analysed as a hybrid theory of revelation rather than a realist or irrealist theory. This is despite the fact that Soroush himself takes his philosophy of religion to be a realistic position. On the other hand, however, his hybrid position, in the interpretation of revelation, apparently has nothing to safeguard his position vis-à-vis the criticisms that (might be) levelled against his theory of religion generally, and specifically his theory of revelation. More specifically, a hybrid position as can be seen in the works of Soroush when dealing with the interpretation of revelation, seemingly leaves no room for the God hypothesis to play any role in explaining the phenomenon of religion in general, and the phenomenon of revelation specifically. Hence, his interpretation of revelation ultimately turns out to be seemingly irrealistic, or at least not far from it. His position in the last analysis, therefore, seems to be inconsistent: it claims to be realistic, but seemingly it is not.

1.2 The Main Questions of the Study

The main questions to be addressed as to his theory of the Qur'anic revelation are:

I. What is the relationship between the Soroushian theory of revelation, and the history of Muslim theories of revelation?

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[1] Moltke S. Gram, *Direct Realism: A Study of Perception* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 1.
[2] Laurence BonJour, "Epistemological Problems of Perception," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2013, Accessed: 2014-10-06, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/perception-episprob/.

II. What are the epistemological foundations of the Soroushian theory of revelation, and what are the differences between his foundations and the traditional epistemological foundations of interpreting the nature of revelation in Muslim theology?

By taking into account a triangle conception, briefly explained above (realism, irrealism and a hybrid position), and applying it to the philosophical study of the nature of the Qur'anic revelation, the main analytical question regarding the Soroushian theory of revelation is: what category can better describe the Soroushian theory of revelation?

III. What are the philosophical problems of his interpretation of revelation?

IV. Can his position be defended against criticism?

1.3 The Importance of and the Rationale for the Research

This research belongs to, one might say, a yet-to-be established academic branch that can tentatively be called "analytic Islamic philosophy of religion". Although philosophy of religion in the Western academic context is still to a significant extent Christian based, one can benefit from the current literature of analytic philosophy (of religion), as well as theological and philosophical discussions in the history of Muslim theology, philosophy, and mysticism in order to philosophically (and not only historically) study early, medieval, modern, and contemporary Islam.

But this is a widely neglected branch in the academic discipline of Islamic studies which is more historical. Amongst the few philosophers whose works can be properly categorized as "Islamic analytic philosophy of religion", one can mention Shabbir Akhtar (b. 1960) a Pakistani-British philosopher (e. g. his *The Quran and the Secular Mind, A Philosophy of Islam*[3]), and Adel Daher a Lebanese-American philosopher (e. g. his 'Arabic magnum opus *al-Usus al-Falsifiyya lil-'Alamaniyya* [*The Philosophical Foundations of Secularism*]).[4] More recently, one can mention the works of Anthony Robert Booth, especially his *Analytic Islamic Philosophy*, probably the first and so far the only monograph bearing such a title.[5]

Contributing to the establishment of the academic branch of Analytic Islamic philosophy of religion is a desideratum not only for the discipline of Islamic studies which is more historical, but also for the discipline of analytic philosophy of religion which is more Christian. Some analytic philosophers of religion have argued that to remedy the 'unhealthy overrepresentation'

[3] Shabbir Akhtar, *The Quran and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008).
[4] Adel Daher, *Al-Usus Al-Falsifiyya Lil-'Alamaniyya [The Philosophical Foundations of Secularism]* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1993).
[5] Anthony Robert Booth, *Analytic Islamic Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

of Christian theists in the analytic philosophy of religion, 'Islam is a fertile ground of philosophical questions and arguments for analytic philosophers of religion to engage with.'[6]

More specifically, to the best of my knowledge no scholarly monograph in English has so far been published to exclusively study the *philosophy* of divine revelation in contemporary Islam. This research intends, therefore, to also contribute to this important but widely neglected field of study.

Moreover, the philosophical study of revelation even in the Christian context of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion is also a relatively new sub-field of study. Among very few analytic philosophers, however, who extensively work on this sub-field, the works of William J Abraham (b. 1947) an Irish theologian and philosopher,[7] Norbert M. Samuelson (b. 1936) a philosopher specialized in Jewish philosophy,[8] and Samuel Fleischacker (b. 1961) a moral and political philosopher[9] are noteworthy.[10] William J Abraham explains the scarcity of philosophical works on revelation:

> For a generation and more, the topic of divine revelation has fallen on hard times in philosophical circles. The interest has shifted to other topics. The topic rarely shows up in introductory textbooks. Students are at a loss to know what to make of its place in debates about the rationality of Christian belief.[11]

More recently, the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* have also put special emphasis on the same point: "there is a (relatively) very small literature on the topic of divine revelation".[12]

Before going any further, one might ask: Why focus on Soroush in this study? It is because of the significance of his theory of revelation, and also the significance of his ideas in general. His theory of the Qur'anic revelation is significant specifically because he takes the problems of revelation, mentioned below, quite seriously. Soroush is one of the most prominent figures in the intellectual as well as the political history of post-revolutionary Iran. He has significantly contributed both to modern Muslim theology, and to the political philosophy of contemporary

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[6] Moti Mizrahi, "If Analytic Philosophy of Religion Is Sick, Can It Be Cured?," *Religious Studies*, 2019, 5.
[7] William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
[8] Norbert M. Samuelson, *Revelation and the God of Israel* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[9] Samuel Fleischacker, *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World: A Defense of Revealed Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[10] George Mavrodes (b. 1926) an American philosopher and Paul Helm (b. 1940) a British philosopher and theologian have been among the pioneers contributing to the philosophical study of revelation in Anglo-American (analytic) tradition. See George I. Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).Paul Helm, *The Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982).
[11] William J. Abraham, "Forward," in *The Agnostic Inquirer: Revelation from a Philosophical Standpoint* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), xi.
[12] T P. Flint and M C. Rea, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

Islam.[13] *Time* magazine named him as one of the world's 100 most influential people in 2005.[14] In a poll conducted in 2008 by *Prospect* magazine and *Foreign Policy*, in which over a half million voters all over the world voted, he became the world's seventh top public intellectual.[15]

Despite the significance of Soroush, the academic study of his ideas is rather scarce, but still steadily thriving.[16] The majority of this literature, however, has mainly focused on his social and political thoughts.[17] Although Soroush's ideas can hardly be grasped without taking into consideration his deep engagement with the political context of Iran and Muslim world, this narrow focus runs the risk of implying that Soroush's ideas bear only a regional significance— thereby providing a significance merely for the intellectual history of post-revolutionary Iran, or by extension for modern Islam.[18] Even the very few books which address his ideas from a philosophical perspective tend more or less to show the relevance and significance of his philosophical ideas for Islamic reform and modern Islam.[19]

While the significance of Soroush's ideas for the intellectual history of post-revolutionary Iran and modern Islam can hardly be denied, its relevance and probable significance for a broader philosophical context has not yet been recognized. In this research I intend not only to contribute to the sparse literature of academic study of Soroush's ideas in general, but also to suggest a new avenue through which the potential of Soroush's ideas can be more fully explored.

Accordingly, I put his theory of the Qur'anic revelation within the broader realism-irrealism context of debate in contemporary philosophy (of religion). In this way, Soroush's ideas might turn out to be relevant to anyone, from any (ir)religious background, with a philosophical interest in divine revelation.

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[13] Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, "Abdolkarim Soroush," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, ed. John L. Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 246. For more on the significance of Soroush in shaping the Iranian post-revolutionary political theology, see Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform* (London/New York: I.B.Tauris, 2008), Ch 7.

[14] Scott Macleod, "The 2005 TIME 100 - TIME," *Time*, accessed July 30, 2014, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1972656_1972712_1974251,00.html.

[15] "Intellectuals—the Results | Prospect Magazine," accessed July 30, 2014, http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/100-top-public-intellectuals.

[16] For a bibliography of mainly English academic studies on Soroush from the late 1990s up until 2013, see Sayeh Meisami, "`Abdolkarim Soroush," Oxford Bibliographies, http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0034.xml.

[17] See, e.g., Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953-2000: From Bazargan to Soroush* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), chap. 5; Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform* (London/New York: I.B.Tauris, 2008); Katajun Amirpur, *New Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Freedom, Democracy and Women's Rights*, trans. Eric Ormsby (London: Gingko Library, 2013), ch. 7.

[18] See also, e.g. Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996); and Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

[19] See in this regard Ashk Dahlen, *Islamic Law, Epistemology and Modernity: Legal Philosophy in Contemporary Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2003), and also this very recent book Heydar Shadi, *The Philosophy of Religion in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Epistemological Turn in Islamic Reform Discourse* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2019).

1.4 Divine Revelation and Its Problems

Besides the importance of this research as a study aiming at contributing to the widely neglected but important areas of study – the philosophical study of divine revelation, and philosophical study of Soroush's ideas, as well as contributing to another important but underdeveloped field of study – the analytic Islamic philosophy of religion, the idea of divine revelation itself is a crucially important, if not the most important, subject in the history of Muslim (philosophical) theology.

Revelation (*wahy* or *tanzil*) is regarded by Muslims to be the theological cornerstone of Islam. Muslims believe that since Muhammad, constantly and faithfully, received divine revelation he is the prophet of God. Therefore, one can justifiably conclude that Islamic prophecy, and the Qur'an as a scripture, cannot be comprehended without making sense of the phenomenon of divine revelation . Nevertheless, as I shall explain in Chapter Two, the history of Muslim theology, philosophy, mysticism, and the Qur'anic exegesis bear witness to this fact that there is a wide diversity of views among Muslim theologians, philosophers, mystics as well as exegetes, especially in the early centuries of Islam, on the way the nature of the Qur'anic revelation is to be understood.

It seems plausible, moreover, to claim that Islam is a scripture-oriented religion. In Islam it is traditionally deemed that God has sent His/Her/Its[20] revelation to a chosen person (in Islam: Muhammad), the canonical manifestation of which in Islam is the Qur'an. In Christianity however, the story appears to be different from Islam to a significant extent. In Christianity, God Him/Her/Itself is literally incarnated in Jesus Christ. Hence, Jesus is not regarded as a prophet like Moses or Muhammad, but the incarnate Son of God. As Richard Swinburne (b. 1934) a British philosopher explains:

> Divine revelation may be either of God, or by God of propositional truth. Traditionally, Christianity has claimed that the Christian Revelation has involved both of these: God revealed himself in becoming incarnate (i.e. human) as Jesus Christ, and by the teaching of Jesus and the Church which he founded God revealed various propositional truths.[21]

When it comes to the Qur'anic conception of revelation, the English word 'revelation' covers principally two Qur'anic terms: *wahy* (lit. communication and inspiration), and *tanzil* (lit. sending down). In the Qur'an itself, as well as in Muslim theology and philosophy, the concept of revelation is the key to the nature of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an this concept extends well beyond prophecy in such a way that it is not only God who sends revelation, but even 'the Satans inspire (*layuhuna*) their

[20] Throughout this research I will use gender-neutral pronouns for God.
[21] Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2 ed. (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

friends',[22] and it is not only humans (prophets or otherwise)[23] who receive divine revelation, but 'your Lord inspired the bee'[24] and even non-living things such as heaven[25] and earth receive revelation.[26] This was all about the *recipients* of revelation. Revelation in the Qur'an, however, is sometime used to refer to the *process* of revelation,[27] and most of the times it is used to refer to its *product*, i.e. the content revealing the will of God.[28] And sometimes the Qur'an itself as a whole is called revelation: 'We have revealed an 'Arabic Qur'an to you.'[29]

Some scholars of Muslim thought, such as Arthur Jeffery (1892-1959), and Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-1993), have suggested a 'historical development in Muhammad's thought' as reflected in the Qur'an with regard to the conception of revelation, in which the early conception of revelation in the Qur'an reflects it as 'internal inspiration'—this is a conception which was familiar to 'Arabs with regard to poets—and its later development as 'external revelation' to make a clear distinction between himself as a prophet and poets.[30]

The difference between the two conceptions of revelation has been marked in the theological and exegetical literature by making a distinction between a kind of prophet, called *rasul* (apostle or messenger of God) who 'receives revelation from angle' and other kind of prophet called *nabi* (prophet) who 'receives revelation only in dreams.' *Rasul* is distinguished from *nabi* as the former having established a new *shari'a* while the latter has only preached the divine law (*shari'a*) revealed to other prophets.[31]

Unlike Christianity, in which it is assumed that God has revealed Him/Her/Itself directly through 'incarnation' in Jesus Christ,[32] revelation in Islam is taken to be indirect. It is always God's message—even if taken to be the verbatim word of God—that is transmitted, and God Him/Her/Itself is never directly manifested, although it has been highly debatable during the history of Muslim theology whether or not God's speech is inseparable from God. Moreover, the divine message has been widely considered to be delivered most of the times through a mediation,

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[22] Q. 6: 121. Abdel Haleem has translated, in his English translation of the Qur'an, the word *layuhuna* in this verse as 'incite', while in other verses it is translated as 'inspire'. This seems not to do justice to the word because there is no reason to translate a single word into different equivalences merely based on the negative or positive usages of the word. That is why I preferred exceptionally here to opt for Arberry's translation: A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
[23] For a revelation to people who are not prophets, see e.g. Q. 28: 7.
[24] Q. 16: 68.
[25] Q. 41: 12.
[26] Q. 99: 5.
[27] Such as Q. 4: 163.
[28] Such as 5: 111 and 18: 110.
[29] Q. 42: 7.
[30] A.J. Wensinck and A. Rippin, "Wahy," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second ed., vol 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 54.
[31] Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Prophethood," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2004), 4: 289.
[32] In Christianity God has also revealed Him/Her/Itself indirectly through 'creation' (e.g. Psalm 19: 1-4), 'conscience' (e.g. Romans 2: 14-15), and 'the canon of Scripture' (e.g. John 20: 31).

most noticeably through archangel called *Jibril* (Gabriel).[33]

The characterization of the relation between the existing Qur'an, i.e. the Qur'an as we have it 'between the covers' (*ma bayn al-daffatayn*), and divine revelation, i.e. what is taken to be the heavenly source of the Qur'an, has been highly problematic, and thus subject to debate for Muslim theologians, philosophers, mystics and exegetes from the very early centuries of Islam. Some of these problems can be formulated as follows:

1- On the one hand the Qur'an is considered by Muslims to be divine, and since God is transcendent then God's speech is above and beyond any human form including human speech form. On the other hand, since the Qur'an is speech it has to have all the features of human speech including its limitations, otherwise it would become incomprehensible.[34] Jurists (*fuqaha'*), principally, cannot make sense of the Qur'anic legislation, legal imperatives, and prohibitions, unless they have already in their legal methodology (*usul al-fiqh*) likened them to those issued from a human-like legislator. For example, in *usul al-fiqh* in order to make sense of the Qur'anic imperatives and prohibitions, the relation between God and human is usually portrayed as the relation between lord or master (*Mawla*) and servant or slave (*'abd*). This human-like superior-inferior relationship is, among other things, influenced by some parts of the Qur'an itself[35] and the common sense of human relationships in ancient and medieval times, in such a way that it is quite similar to the relation between the mundane master and servant, and one has to conform to the heavenly master's commands and decrees. There are alternative depictions of the relationship between God and human, such as the beloved-lover model in Muslim mysticism, based upon which however jurists could not easily deduce a system of laws from the Qur'an and sunna. Thereby the paradoxical, if not contradictory, nature of the Qur'anic revelation arises, the Qur'an at the same time is both beyond, and within human forms.

2- Muslim 'orthodoxy' is inclined to ascribe immediacy to the Qur'anic revelation, in the sense that revelation comes directly and purely from God without any mediation. At the same time 'it recognizes the mediation required logically and theologically by the absolute ontological distance between God and creation, and even the relative distance between the human and the angelic.'[36]

3- The *tafsir* (exegesis) literature has developed the exegetical genre usually referred to as 'occasions/circumstances of revelation' (*asbab al-nuzul*) to figure out historical or narrative contexts (such as the questions people supposedly asked the prophet or a tension arose between them) as a

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[33] Daniel A. Madigan, "Revelation and Inspiration," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 4 (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2004), 437–8.
[34] Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Quran* (Islamic Book Trust, 2002), 166.
[35] For example, the Qur'an sometimes adopts business-oriented language when talking about spiritual matters: 'They have bought error in exchange for guidance, so their trade reaps no profit, and they are not rightly guided.' Q. 2: 16.
[36] Daniel A. Madigan, "Revelation and Inspiration," 447.

reaction to which a verse (*aya*) or a chapter (*sura*) has been revealed.[37] However, the 'orthodox' classical Qur'anic sciences persist in asserting the pre-existence and timelessness of the Qur'an, and 'orthodox' Islam agrees with them.[38] As we shall see in chapter two tackling these issues has led some Muslim philosophers and theologians to develop some radically different theories of Qur'anic revelation.

1.5 The Plan of the Research.

In Chapter Two I suggest a new taxonomy for classifying the different theories of the Qur'anic revelation in the history of Muslim thought. In Chapter Three I suggest a new taxonomy for different views on the realism-irrealism debate in contemporary analytic philosophy (of religion). In Chapter Four I delineate the theoretical foundations upon which Soroush seems to be building his theory of revelation. In Chapter Five I explain the Soroushian theory of revelation. In Chapter Six, I categorize, and then philosophically criticize the Soroushian theory of revelation. In the Concluding Chapter after summing up the main findings of the study I come up with some further research programs.

[37] A. Rippin, "The Function of Asbāb Al-Nuzūl in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, no. 01 (February 1988): 1–20.
[38] Daniel A. Madigan, "Revelation and Inspiration," 447.

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2 The Realism–Irrealism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

2.1 Introduction

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the main aim of this study is to philosophically evaluate the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation, and by 'philosophical evaluation' it is specifically meant here to: first ascertain how to categorize his theory of revelation in terms of the realism–-irrealism debate in philosophy (of religion); and second to determine whether or not his theory can withstand the criticisms that are (or can be) levelled against the category to which his theory specifically belongs.

In order to achieve this end, we first need to build up a broad picture of the debates regarding the realism–irrealism debate in philosophy generally, and in philosophy of religion specifically. That is the main objective of this chapter. The objective of this chapter, therefore, is not to evaluate the different suggested positions in the realism–irrealism debate but only to map, in a relatively new way, the terrain of literature on this topic. More importantly the aim is to come up with (what I think to be) a better taxonomy of different positions in the realism-irrealism debate.

Since this debate in philosophy of religion, to which our discussion belongs, is embedded within a broader context of philosophy, it would be appropriate to embark on our journey in this chapter with a survey of the realism–irrealism debate in philosophy generally, and only then turn to philosophy of religion.

2.2 The Realism-irrealism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy

To begin with, one can be realist or irrealist about different theoretical areas, such as: science, ethics, aesthetics, religion, mathematics, semantics, ordinary objects and so on. Although being realist or irrealist about all these areas seems to be logically possible, philosophers are usually selectively realist or irrealist with respect to some domains. For example, one can be realist about science, but irrealist about ethics or religion. Or one can be realist about ordinary (macroscopic) objects, but irrealist about aesthetics.[1]

But how can realism and irrealism be characterized? As can be expected from a philosophical debate, there is no unanimity among philosophers as to how to characterize realism and irrealism. One way of characterizing them in a general sense, which seems more promising, is

[1] Alexander Miller, "Realism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2014, 2014, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/realism/.

to depict a realist position in any domain as a position mainly consisting of two main theses about that domain: 'existence thesis' and 'independence thesis'; and similarly to depict an irrealist claim as denying one or both of these theses. Based upon this, one can characterize realism, at least initially, as follows:[2]

> *Realism (initial characterization):*
> There are distinctive entities or facts or properties or events about a given domain (existence thesis) that are, in a significant sense, mind- and language- and feeling- and act-independent and objective (independence thesis).

For example, in the case of colour theory, a colour realist holds the view that the property of colour can be attributed to an object *per se* in such a way that if there had not been any perceiver the object would have still been, in one way or another, coloured. Consequently, one can characterize anti-realism, at least initially, as follows:[3]

> *Irrealism (initial characterization):*
> Either there are no entities or facts or properties or events about a given domain (the denial of existence thesis) or if there are, they are not, in any significant sense, mind- and language- and feeling- and act-independent and objective (the denial of independence thesis) or both (the denial of both the existence and independence thesis).[4]

Getting back to the colour example, a colour irrealist might concede the existence of colour, but he/she might consider its existence as solely mind-dependent, and not a property of an independent object to which the colour belongs. To put it in a rather metaphorical way, a colour irrealist might hold that it is our experience that is coloured rather than the object itself. Since the mind-independence of the property of colour has been thereby denied, the denier is a colour irrealist. But a colour irrealist can go even further denying the very existence of, so to speak, our coloured experiences and take this position that 'the qualitative character of colour experience is reducible to neural processes.'[5] Such a colour irrealist is an irrealist *par excellence*, since he/she has denied both the existence, and the independence theses with regard to colour.

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[2] In order to depict a full-fledged realism however, more elements need to be added to this characterization. This will be elaborated later in this chapter.
[3] In order to have a full-fledged anti-realism however, more elements need to be added to this characterization. This will be elaborated below.
[4] Stuart Brock and Edwin Mares, *Realism and Anti-Realism* (Montreal/Ithaca: Acumen, 2010), 2. Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, Second edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 13–25.
[5] C. L. Hardin, *Color for Philosophers: Unweaving the Rainbow*, Expanded edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), xxii.

To further explain this initial characterization, let me allude to some other important philosophical areas in which the realism–irrealism debate is alive and feverish.

2.2.1 Metaphysical Realism–Irrealism Debate

One of the highly significant areas, if not the most significant area, in which this debate has been held is the field of metaphysics. Common-sense or Metaphysical or Ontological or External World Realists contend that ordinary objects such as trees, mountains and galaxies exist independently of the way we think, talk, feel or act with regard to them. For instance, an Anglo-Irish philosopher George Berkeley (1658-1753), a classical idealist and irrealist, thought that everything is a part of God's mental life. An Idealist, in metaphysical sense, accepts objects' existence but denies that their existence is independent of the mental items, ideas, or sense data and therefore they are not external to the mind. Hence, an idealist is metaphysical irrealist since he/she denies the independence thesis with regard to ordinary objects.

Contemporary irrealists, however, do not usually tend to base their irrealistic position on God,[6] but rather they tend to base it on the human's linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, theoretical systems, and so on. This implies that we cannot say without any qualification that 'galaxies exist', but we have to qualify our assertion in, for example, this way that 'according to a specific conceptual scheme and theoretical system, galaxies exist.' Then, according to metaphysical irrealists "*What objects does the world consist of*? is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description".[7]

It is to be borne in mind that while the realism–irrealism debate in other areas, such as science, ethics, aesthetics and religion, are 'departmental' or local debates, the metaphysical realism–irrealism debate is global in character.[8] The global character of a metaphysical realism–irrealism debate can probably be explained in this way: those who are metaphysical irrealists seem not to be able to be realist in any departmental or local debates; for example a metaphysical irrealist cannot be scientific realist. But a metaphysical realist can probably be an irrealist in some or even all departmental areas. For example, a metaphysical realist can be irrealist in science, aesthetics, religion, and ethics.

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[6] For an exception, see: Charles Taliaferro, "Taking the Mind of God Seriously: Why and How to Become a Theistic Idealist," in *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, ed. Andrei Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 147–63.
[7] Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 49.
[8] William P. Alston, *A Sensible Metaphysical Realism* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 8.

2.2.2 Scientific Realism–Irrealism Debate

Another philosophical area in which the realism-irrealism debate is alive is in the philosophy of science. Scientific realism is a position within the philosophy of science to the effect that:

1- A mind-independent reality exists (the metaphysical realism presupposed by scientific realism);

2- Theoretical claims of science, whether about observable or unobservable entities, e.g. propositions about electrons, bear truth value and hence are to be construed as being true or false (the semantic aspect of scientific realism);

3- At least some of the best (well-established) scientific theories are known to be (approximately) true (the epistemological aspect of scientific realism).[9]

Here now, we have a full-fledged characterization of realism already promised. This involves not only an ontological component already explained, but also semantic and epistemological components. A full-fledged characterization of realism in general can then be formulated as follows:

> *Realism (full-fledged characterization)*:
>
> *Ontological component:* There are distinctive entities or facts or properties or events about a given domain (existence thesis) that are, in a significant sense, mind- and/or language- and/or feeling- and/or act- independent and objective (independence thesis).
> *Semantic component:* Our talk of entities or facts or properties or events about a given domain is in principle capable of being evaluated in terms of being a true or false depiction of that domain (truth aptness thesis).
> *Epistemological component:* at least some of our significant propositions about them are known, or justifiably believed to be (approximately) objectively true (truth ascertainability thesis).

Accordingly, one can characterize the full-fledged irrealism as follows:

> *Irrealism (full-fledged characterization)*:
> *Ontological component*: either there are no entities or facts or properties or events about a given domain (the denial of existence thesis), or if there are, they are not in any significant sense mind- and/or language- and/or feeling- and/or act- independent and objective (the denial of independence thesis) or both (the denial of both the existence and independence thesis).

[9] Anjan Chakravartty, *A Metaphysics for Scientific Realism: Knowing the Unobservable* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.

Semantic component: Our talk of entities or facts or properties or events about a given domain is, in principle, not capable of being evaluated in terms of being a true or false depiction of that domain (the denial of truth aptness thesis).

Epistemological component: even if our talk of entities or facts or properties or events about a given domain is truth apt, none of our propositions about them are known to be (approximately) true or false (the denial of truth ascertainability thesis).

Scientific irrealism denies one or more than one aspect of scientific realism, i.e., metaphysical, semantic, or epistemological aspects. They might deny the (independent) existence of reality or at least the existence of unobservable entities or both, or repudiate the truth aptness of theoretical theories about observable or unobservable entities or both, or they might reject the (approximate) truth ascertainability of even the best scientific theories (scientific agnosticism).[10]

It is to be emphasized that the main controversy among scientific realists–irrealists is over whether or not the unobservable entities widely supposed in scientific theories independently exist.[11]

2.2.3 Moral Realism–Irrealism Debate

Moral realism is a philosophical theory about the nature and status of moral claims according to which moral facts or properties are in a significant way exist independently, and moral claims purport to report them truth-aptly, and at least some of our moral claims or judgments are known to be objectively (approximately) true.[12]

It is once again helpful to distinguish between different aspects of the characterization of the realism–irrealism debate. Those who deny the very existence of moral facts or properties are commonly called moral nihilists.[13] They are moral irrealists *par excellence*, since they deny the existence thesis. All moral realists are cognitivist. Cognitivists hold firstly that moral claims express

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[10] Anjan Chakravartty, "Scientific Realism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2014, 2014, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/scientific-realism/.

[11] Michael Devitt, "Realism/Anti-Realism," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Science*, ed. Martin Curd and Stathis Psillos, second ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), 257.

[12] For a significantly different characterization of moral realism according to which 'the *independent* existence' is not taken to be an element of characterizing moral realism, see e.g. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), esp. 5-6. I have not pursued this way of characterizing moral realism or irrealism in general, especially because I think both theses (existence and independence theses) of metaphysical aspect of moral realism, and more generally any kind of philosophical realism, is centrally significant in such a way that in no way they can be ignored or downplayed. For a short but (I think) convincing criticism of Sayre-McCord's characterization of moral realism, see Richard Joyce, "Moral Anti-Realism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2007, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/moral-anti-realism/.

[13] Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14; David Owen Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14–16.

belief, which is a cognitive state, and consequently moral claims do not only express non-cognitive mental states such as desires, intentions, awe, devotion, approvals and disapprovals. According to cognitivism, therefore, moral language is supposed to describe an aspect of reality. Secondly, moral claims can be true or false because beliefs can be true or false.[14] Non-cognitivists, however, take moral judgments not to be in the business of describing the independent world at all; therefore moral judgments are neither true nor false, but they are essentially related to non-cognitive mental states such as feelings and desires.

Although all moral realists are cognitivist, not all cognitivists are realist. For example, moral error theorists argue that although moral claims purport to describe facts (hence their cognitivist position), they are all categorically false because there are no moral facts and therefore our moral claims always fail to describe the world (hence their irrealism). Moral error theorists are, therefore, irrealist, since they deny the metaphysical and consequently the epistemological aspect of moral realism.[15]

Although there are some moral irrealists who are cognitivist (e.g. the advocates of error theory),[16] most of moral irrealists are not cognitivist. A non-cognitivist kind of irrealism is expressivism. Expressivism is a dominant kind of non-cognitivism so much so that non-cognitivism is often defined in terms of expressivism,[17] although there are some other kinds of non-cognitivism such as emotivism. According to expressivism, moral claims do not purport to *describe* our belief about the world; rather, they *express* but not *describe* our emotions, prescriptions, and generally non-cognitive mental states.

To get a better sense of the difference between description and expression, this example might help: expressivists often believe that when one sincerely says 'stealing is wrong' there is nothing descriptive (even description of pertinent feelings) in this sentence, but by saying this one only expresses one's own attitude. It is as if by saying 'stealing is wrong' one is saying 'stealing–argghhh!',[18] where 'argghhh' stands for a verbal expression of disapproval.

2.3 Realism–Irrealism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

Now after making sense of the realism-irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy in a general sense, since our discussion is specifically about this debate in philosophy of religion, let us now focus on it. In this section, it is not my intention to criticize the theories explained, instead my

[14] Andrew Fisher, *Metaethics: An Introduction* (Durham: Routledge, 2011), 7.
[15] Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, third ed. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 309.
[16] When criticizing the Soroushian theory of revelation in chapter 6 I will talk at length about moral error theory.
[17] Mark Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2010), 65.
[18] Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 314–15.

intention is to present, in a relatively new way, a general picture of the realism–irrealism debate in the philosophy of religion.

2.3.1 Characterization

In light of the discussion and the different examples I made above, now we are ready to turn to the religious realism–irrealism debate. Religious realism and irrealism are both philosophical theories with regard to the nature and status of religion, and more specifically religious language. They are different responses to the question: What exactly are we doing when we say for example 'God has created us', 'God loves us', and 'we will be rewarded or punished by God in the hereafter' and so on? Now, let me characterize religious realism and irrealism respectively focusing on the monotheistic religions.

> *Realism about religion (full-fledged characterization)*:
> *Ontological component*: If God exists then God exists independently of the way we think and/or feel and/or act and/or talk about Him/Her/It.
> *Semantic component*: Our talk of God is in principle capable of being evaluated in terms of being a true or false depiction of God's existence and God's acts including His/Her/Its speech acts.
> *Epistemological component*: at least some of our significant propositions about God are known or justifiably believed to be (approximately) objectively true.

And likewise, religious irrealism can be characterized, at least initially, as follows:

> *Irrealism about religion (initial characterization)*:
> *Ontological component*: Either God does not exist in any sense (the denial of both existence and dependence thesis) or if He/She/It exists He/She/It exists mind- and/or language- and/or feeling- and/or act- dependently (the denial of independence thesis).
> *Semantic component*: even if God can be talked about, our talk of God is not in principle capable of being evaluated in terms of being true or false depiction of God (the denial of truth aptness)
> *Epistemological component:* even if God exists in a mind- and/or language- and/or feeling- and/or act- independent way, and religious language is truth apt, we are not able to know or justifiably believe whether our talk of God is (approximately) objectively true or false (the denial of truth ascertainability).

2.3.2 Irrealism about Religion

So far, I characterized realism and also initially irrealism about religion in philosophy of religion.[19] Irrealism about religion comes in a variety of forms. It can be further divided into anti-realism and non-realism.[20] The anti-realist form of irrealism shares this view with realists that religious language is truth apt, therefore religious language expresses propositions, and it is supposed to describe an aspect of reality and encompasses truth-claims, but anti-realism differs from realism in giving the negative response, or suspending the judgment, as to whether the objective truth conditions for religious language are obtained.

Put it another way, while realists take at least some significant truth-claims to be (approximately) true, anti-realists take religious language to be either totally false or they suspend judgment about the truth or falsity of religious language (thus they take an agnostic position). For the non-realist form of irrealism, however, religious language is not even capable of being true or false, i.e. it is not truth apt, and therefore does not express propositions, and does not contain truth-claims.

The distinction between anti-realism and non-realism is not common in the literature of philosophy of religion and 'non-realism' and 'anti-realism' has usually been used interchangeably. However, this has sometimes been suggested to make a useful distinction between theological cognitivists and non-cognitivists: anti-realists like realists are cognitivists, while non-realists are not so.

Now, before going any further in our discussion of irrealism, in the light of the points just made above let me characterize irrealism in a fully-fledged way.

> *Irrealism about religion (full-fledged characterization)*:
> *Anti-realist irrealism*: Although religious language is truth apt, it does not obtain its truth conditions (atheism) or we do not know or justifiably believe whether or not it does (agnosticism).
> *Non-realist irrealism:* Religious language is not in principle truth apt, therefore if God's existence can be talked about meaningfully it can only be talked about mind- and/or language- and/or feeling- and/or act-dependently.

[19] There are a few positions that do not fit into this binary position. That is why this division into realism and irrealism is taken here to be *initial*. I shall add later in this chapter a hybrid position which is the mixture of some elements of both realism and irrealism.
[20] Nathan S. Hilberg, *Religious Truth and Religious Diversity* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 2.

2.3.2.1 Anti-Realist Irrealism

As mentioned above, anti-realism can be divided into ontological and epistemological kinds. Ontological anti-realists wholeheartedly deny the very existence of God, in any sense of the term, and try to explain the widespread prevalence of belief in God in a psychological, sociological, biological, neuro-scientific way or other similar ways. They are called ontological anti-realists since they reject the ontological status that is usually attributed to belief in God, and reduce it to a non-ontological category.[21]

In what follows, I shall briefly explain some of the most important ontological anti-realist positions with regards to belief in God.

2.3.2.1.1 Ontological Anti-Realism

In modern times, the representatives of ontological anti-realism are, amongst others, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1874) a German philosopher and anthropologist, Karl Marx (1818-1883) a German philosopher and political economist, Emil Durkheim (1858-1917) a French sociologist, and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist.

Sigmund Freud, who is one of the most influential thinkers of the early twentieth century, is widely associated with the psychological explanation of religious belief. In his well-known book *The Future of an Illusion*,[22] originally published in 1927, Freud takes up the task of tracing the origin of religion, especially monotheistic religions from a psychoanalytical point of view. Religion, in his view, is deeply rooted in our early ancestors' reaction to the threats and horrors of nature. In their reaction they would humanize the powers of nature and would try to please them in order to feel safe in the world.[23] Then, gradually the diverse humanized powers were reduced to a single heavenly person, and 'now that God was a single person, man's relations to him could recover the intimacy and intensity of the child's relation to his father.'[24] He concludes that religious ideas, and especially the belief in God is nothing but wishful thinking and illusory, and consequently it is highly improbable to be true, and even worse they are not truth-seeking kind of beliefs, rather they are fundamentally formed to satisfy our needs.[25]

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[21] Bruce Reichenbach, "Religious Realism," in *Science and Religion in Dialogue*, ed. Melville Y. Stewart, vol. 2 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1035.
[22] *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*
[23] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. and trans. James Strachely (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 20–21.
[24] Ibid., 24.
[25] Ibid., 40–41.

Around a century before Freud, Feuerbach also in his magnum opus *The Essence of Christianity*,[26] originally published in 1841, reduces theology to anthropology in the sense that in his analysis knowing God is nothing more than knowing human because God is nothing but the projection and externalization of some human features or needs, therefore 'if man is to find contentment in God, he must find himself in God.'[27] He concludes, 'only when we abandon a philosophy of religion, or a theology, which is distinct from psychology and anthropology, and recognise anthropology as itself theology, do we attain to a true, self-satisfying identity of the divine and human being.'[28] God, in this approach, is not a metaphysical being but a manifestation of Human needs in the form of a pseudo-being, that is to say 'the superhuman deities of religion are, in fact, involuntary projections of the essential attributes of human nature.'[29]

For Feuerbach, to take God as having a being separate from human being is false and dangerous. The danger is that this theological error, being ignorant of the psychological and anthropological essence of religion, alienates the human being from humanity: "religion alienates our own nature from us, and represents it as not ours."[30] The alienation, in the Feuerbachian analysis, is rooted in ignoring that God and revelation are not finally distinct from human ambitions, needs and wishes. To take God and divine revelation as being external to human beings would be dangerous, and make the human being far from its authenticity: 'belief in revelation not only injures the moral sense and taste, – the aesthetics of virtue; it poisons, nay it destroys, the divinest feeling in man – the sense of truth, the perception and sentiment of truth.'[31]

Feuerbachian and Freudian theories of religion are seemingly both mainly psychological. For Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) the prominent French sociologist, however, the idea of society, and not the individual as such, is the key to the explanation of the roots of religion. For him religion is not an individual matter, psychological or otherwise, rather it is a matter of society so much so that without society religion, amongst other things, would never exist. In his well-known book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*,[32] originally published in 1912, he criticises an idea, widely associated later with Freud, that 'fear created the gods';[33] rather, for him it is society that creates the gods.

How is it that society has created gods, and how is it different from Freudian psychological theory of religion? Durkheim dwells on the totemism of the early forms of religions to explain the

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[26] *Das Wesen des Christentums*
[27] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Cosimo Classics, 2008), 12.
[28] Ibid., 187.
[29] Van A. Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25.
[30] Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 193.
[31] Ibid., 167.
[32] *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*
[33] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 225.

interconnectedness, or even the identity, of religion and society. The totem of a clan functions as the social binder of the members of the clan to each other, and of the clan entirely to the natural world and also the binder of different parts of the natural world to each other.[34] Without totem there is no connection between things, there is only chaos. That is why totem is sacred. Despite being sacred, however, there is nothing supernatural and divine in religions, primitive or otherwise. God and the society are finally the same:

> [I]f the totem is the symbol of both the god and the society, is this not because the god and the society are one and the same? How could the emblem of the group have taken the form of that quasi-divinity if the group and the divinity were two distinct realities? Thus, the god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be none other than the clan itself.[35]

Although it does not imply that the members of the clan themselves (are willing to) take society and their God to be the same, they are, according to Durkheim, the same. Religion is inescapably and exclusively social, and not metaphysical. It is also not psychological in the sense developed by, among others, Feuerbach and Freud.

Another ontological anti-realistic theory of religion, and a more recent and underdeveloped one, is the 'meme theory of religion' first suggested by Richard Dawkins (b. 1941) an evolutionary biologist and public essayist. In his well-known book *The Selfish Gene* first published in 1976, he suggests a special evolutionary theory of the origin of religion. In this way, he tries to explain the roots of religion neither psychologically nor sociologically, but in a rather special way evolutionarily. He coined the word 'meme' to explain the cultural behaviours of human beings.

Taken from the Greek word *mimeme*, means 'that which is imitated,' and shortened on the pattern of gene, the 'meme' is, as it were, a cultural gene. He claims that there is something like cultural transmission quite similar to genetic transmission. It is not unique to human beings but can also be found for example among the birds and monkeys.[36] Language, art, fashion, customs and architecture are some examples of cultural phenomena that are evolved analogous to the genetic evolution.

Although Dawkins emphasizes that memes are not genes, he goes on to explicate the common characteristics of genes and memes. Like gene, meme is a replicator and replication is made possible through imitation, hence its name.[37] An example he makes for the long survival of a meme through the written records is 'the Jewish religious laws'. Another common characteristic of gene and meme is that both are purposeless, unconscious, ruthless, and selfish. They think of

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[34] Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 101.
[35] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 208.
[36] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary edition (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 189-90.
[37] Ibid., 194.

nothing but replicating themselves in one way or another. Therefore, a gene or meme, which has a survival value, is not necessarily beneficial for the biological and cultural life of the human beings. Nonetheless, as we have 'conscious foresight' to imagine and pave the way for a possible and favourable future, we can sidestep the spread of the dangerous genes and memes.[38] And God meme is one of those 'dangerous' memes: 'God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture.'[39]

Although it is not my intention in this chapter to criticize the theories explained it is worth mentioning that what all these ontological anti-realist theories of religion, despite their differences, have in common is a reductionist approach toward religion. Reductionism is basically based on a 'nothing but' way of passing judgment about the nature of religion: religion is nothing but the fear of the threats of nature, religion is nothing but a manifestation of social solidarity, religion is nothing but a meme, and so one.

Some scholars of religion have argued that the scientific study of religion is to be based on 'nothing but' reductionism.[40] This, it has been argued however, means that to regard the reductionist approach to the scientific study of religion as *the* exclusive scientific approach, is tantamount to taking naturalistic and atheistic approach for granted without providing any philosophical argument for them.[41]

2.3.2.1.2 Epistemological Anti-realism

Unlike ontological anti-realism, epistemological anti-realists do not pass any ontological judgment as to whether or not God, in the realistic sense of the term, exists; rather they suspend the judgment. Epistemological anti-realists are, therefore, theologically agnostic. Agnosticism is usually taken to be different from at least a version of atheism: while agnosticism is the suspension of belief or disbelief, atheism is to disbelieve in the existence of God.[42]

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[38] Ibid., 200.

[39] Ibid., 193. See also Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, New Ed (London: Black Swan, 2007), ch. 5, and Kate Distin, *The Selfish Meme: A Critical Reassessment* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 13.

[40] Robert A. Segal, "In Defense of Reductionism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51, no. 1 (1983): 97–124; idem "Reductionism in the Study of Religion," in *Theories of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Seth Daniel Kunin and Jonathan Miles-Watson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 143–53.

[41] Donald Wiebe, "Beyond the Sceptic and the Devotee: Reductionism in the Scientific Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 1 (1984): 157–65.

[42] In the second half of the Twentieth century, atheism was divided into 'positive atheism' and 'negative atheism'. Positive atheism is *believing* in the non-existence of God, while negative atheism is *disbelieving* in the existence of God. Given this division, agnosticism is not different from negative atheism, but it is different from positive atheism. See e.g. Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 464; idem, "General Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–4.

Agnosticism, according to one division, is divided into 'weak agnosticism' and 'strong agnosticism'. A weak agnostic suspends both belief and disbelief in God, but he/she does not subscribe to the belief of whether or not the existence of God is *in principle* unknowable. Such an agnostic holds that as far as our available evidence thus far can help us to judge epistemically, we cannot prefer belief to disbelief or vice versa. But he/she keeps this possibility open that one day in the future we may be able to acquire enough evidence to prefer epistemically either side of the existence of God question to the other. A strong agnostic, however, not only suspends the judgment but also believes that whether or not God exists is in principle unknowable, and hence no one, even in the far future, can acquire enough evidence to prefer one side to the other.[43]

Weak agnosticism is sometimes called 'contingent agnosticism'; since if the evidence available to us were different, agnosticism could turn into theism or atheism. Strong agnosticism is also sometimes called 'necessary agnosticism'; because this is a kind of agnosticism that could not be in any way otherwise due to the inherent limitation of human knowledge that is emphatically emphasized by necessary agnosticism.

For example Anthony Kenny (b. 1931) an English philosopher, historian of philosophy, and a self-proclaimed agnostic, argues that if God exists, due to His/Her/Its transcendence He/She/It would be so inconceivable and ineffable that it is unknown and unknowable, and therefore the best philosophical position toward the question of God's existence would be agnosticism.[44]

In what sense epistemological anti-realism (agnosticism) is anti-realistic? First of all, it is not realistic because although, like ontological realism, it endorses the ontological aspect of realism (that is, if God exists then God exists independently) but, like epistemological anti-realism it does not share the epistemological aspect of realism, that is it does not share this view that at least some of our significant propositions about God are known or justifiably believed to be (approximately) true. The difference between the ontological and epistemological versions of anti-realism, therefore, is that while ontological anti-realism denies the truth or at least the plausibility of propositions about the existence of God, the epistemological anti-realism neither denies nor endorses the existence of God. Agnosticism is also not non-realistic, because non-realists are not cognitivist, while agnostics are cognitivist.

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[43] Graham Oppy, "Weak Agnosticism Defended," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 36, no. 3 (1994): 147–49. For a slightly different distinction between various kinds of agnosticism, see William L. Rowe, "Agnosticism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998).

[44] Anthony Kenny, *The Unknown God: Agnostic Essays* (London/New York: Continuum, 2004).

2.3.2.2 Non-Realist Irrealism

The difference between non-realism and anti-realism, as mentioned before, is that the former takes religions language not to be truth apt, while the latter takes it to be so; though for antirealists religious truth-claims are false or unjustified, or at least its truth or falsity is not ascertainable. According to non-realists, however, religion is not aimed at describing or depicting, if anything at all, the world in an objective way. For a group of non-realists what is key to understanding is that religions are not religious *beliefs*, but religious *practices*. Let us take a closer look at non-realism.

2.3.2.2.1 Wittgenstein and Phillips on Religion

One of the key figures in the Twentieth century philosophy in general and specifically in philosophy of religion is Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), an Austrian-British philosopher. One of the remarkable facts about him is that while in his lifetime he published almost nothing about religion, what is later widely considered to be his conception of religion has proven to have had a tremendous effect on Twentieth Century philosophy of religion.[45]

Wittgenstein's philosophy is typically divided into two rather distinct stages of 'early' and 'later', though this division has been put under question in different ways.[46] The early Wittgenstein is usually marked by his masterpiece *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, originally published in German in 1921, and translated into English and published in 1922. This was the only one of his books published during his lifetime. The later Wittgenstein is epitomized in his *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953.

The difference between the former and the later Wittgenstein can be encapsulated, *inter alia*, in his drastic shift from what is commonly called 'picture theory of meaning' to what is commonly called 'the use theory of meaning'. In the *Tractatus* he is mainly concerned with the logical analysis of language. Some of the main questions in this regard are: what is the essence of language, and its main function? How are we to make a distinction between the 'use' and the 'misuse' of language? What is it that makes language meaningful or meaningless?

The essence of language and its main function, according to Wittgenstein is in his early philosophy is to 'show' how things are, and 'say' them to be the case.[47] As, for example, a picture of a garden reflects the garden (otherwise, a picture that reflects nothing is not a picture in the

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[45] Genia Schoenbaumsfeld, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," in *Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 162.

[46] See. e. g., David Stern, "The 'Middle Wittgenstein': From Logical Atomism to Practical Holism," in *Wittgenstein in Florida: Proceedings of the Colloquium on the Philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein*, ed. Jaakko Hintikka (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1991), 203–26.

[47] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* § 4.022. All references to the *Tractatus* is to this translation: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, second ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2001).

ordinary sense of the term) a proposition only has a sense when it represents, or at least aims to, but fails to represent the reality. Wittgenstein says 'A proposition is a picture of reality. A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it.'[48] The sense of a proposition is related to the thought which is in turn related to the world. The world is the sum total of the state of affairs. The meaningful thought, in the form of proposition, is what represents the states of affairs.

More importantly for our discussion, Wittgenstein says it is only natural sciences that are in the business of depicting the world, and philosophy does not belong to the natural sciences. Philosophy, therefore, is not a fact-stating enterprise but only an 'activity' to 'clarify' thoughts and set their limits.[49] Philosophy's duty is not, thus, to explain the states of affairs, but to show what can be said and what cannot be said, and that is exactly what Wittgenstein tries to determine in his early philosophy. Philosophical issues, be it metaphysical, theological or any other sort (such as whether God's existence is compatible with gratuitous evil or whether knowledge of the external world is possible) are nonsensical, because nothing can be said about these kinds of issues that can be taken to be about the description of the state of affairs.[50]

What are we supposed to do with 'what cannot be said', with what he calls 'the mystical', i.e. with the propositions of philosophy, theology, ethics, aesthetics and so on, as opposed to what can be said, i.e. 'the propositions of natural sciences'? More specifically, what are we to do with the *Tractatus* itself that thoroughly contains philosophical propositions in the light of which the very propositions of the book are nonsensical? He uses a metaphor to sidestep the paradox of using nonsensical propositions to show what is sensical and what is not: 'anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)'.[51] His work is, hence, a therapeutic work, it helps us to be relieved from what is taken to be philosophical problems, which in the light of the *Tractatus* itself turn out to be irrevocably pseudo problems.

The early Wittgenstein's conception of religion in the *Tractatus* was interpreted in two different ways. Logical positivists, especially Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970), a German-American philosopher and an influential member of Vienna circle, were highly influenced by the *Tractatus*.[52]

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[48] § 4.01.
[49] §§ 4.11, 4.111, 4.112.
[50] What he says about the nonsensicality of scepticism can also be said, in the light of the Tractatus' criterion, about all philosophical issues: "Scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked. For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*." § 6.51. That is why exactly before this phrase he suggests his general criterion of what can or cannot be said which leads to the non-existence of metaphysical questions: "When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. The *riddle* does not exist. If a question can be framed at all, it is also *possible* to answer it." § 6.5.
[51] § 6.54.
[52] Michael Friedman, *Reconsidering Logical Positivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 177–97.

When it comes to religion, however, logical positivists or those influenced by them took two different positions. Radical logical positivists considered religion to be a suspicious illusion and pointless. Carnap, for example, argues that the word 'God' either bears the *mythological* sense, which is associated with some physical bodies as gods or God's manifestations, and therefore meaningful because it refers to something empirically verifiable but it turns out to be false, or it bears *metaphysical* sense which is nonsensical, or finally it bears *theological* sense which is the mixture of mythological and metaphysical senses, and hence partially false and partially meaningless.[53] This radical positivistic position, therefore, was more or less hostile to religion.

But some other positivists envisaged a place for religion, and more generally for metaphysical claims in their positivistic philosophy. As far as religion makes no fact-stating claims––a responsibility entirely and exclusively put on the shoulders of science—religion is legitimate. Religion helps believers to make the holistic sense of the world that they live in, and to take an attitude towards it without making any claim about how the world is or is not.[54] Although Wittgenstein's conception of religion was taken by some critics of positivism or some moderate positivists, especially in the heydays of positivism, to be close to radical positivism,[55] it seems to be the case that the early Wittgenstein's conception of religion is closer to moderate positivism. A historical contextualization of his thought corroborates this judgment. An intellectual biography of Wittgenstein shows that he laboriously tried to reconcile the physics of Heinrich Hertz (1857-1894), a German physicist, and Ludwig Boltzmann (1844-1096), an Austrian physicist and philosopher, with the ethical and religious thought of Kierkegaard and Tolstoy.[56]

This interpretation of Wittgenstein's early philosophy is in line with his own distinction between 'saying' and 'showing': 'What can be shown, *cannot* be said.'[57] What cannot be said, i.e. what is non-sensical, but can be shown includes not only the logical form of the world but also the realm of unsayable, 'the mystical' (religion, ethics, aesthetics, and so on): 'there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical'[58].[59]

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[53] Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 66–67. See also Thomas D. Carroll, *Wittgenstein Within the Philosophy of Religion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 80–81.
[54] R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).
[55] See, e.g. Thomas McPherson, "Positivism and Religion," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 14, no. 3 (1954): 327. Leszek Kolakowski, *The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivist Thought* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 208.
[56] Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), 167ff.
[57] § 4. 1212.
[58] § 6. 522.
[59] Compare this with Wittgenstein's letter to Russell regarding the main point of the *Tractatus*: 'The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (*gesagt*) by prop[osition]s – i.e. by language – (and, which comes to the same, what can be thought) and what cannot be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (*gezeigt*); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.' Brian McGuinness, ed., *Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents 1911-1951*, 4th Edition (Malden/Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 98.

Interpreted in this way, religion belongs to the realm of the ineffable. Thus, not only is the *Tractatus* not hostile to religion, but it also paves the way for a critique of ordinary religious language that belongs to the realm of the unsayable. Understood in this way, the *Tractatus* finally makes a room for, one might say, a kind of apophatic mysticism.[60] God does not show Him/Her/Itself in the world, therefore nothing can be said about God's acts, but the very existence of the world is mystical: 'God does not reveal himself in the world',[61] and 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists'.[62] That nothing can be said about God prepares the mystic to go beyond the ordinary description of the world. In such a situation the mystic has nothing to do but to remain silent.[63] In the light of this, Wittgenstein's advice in the last proposition of the *Tractatus* can be taken to be ethical and religious (apophatic) advice: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.'[64]

Now, it is time to ask the question that is most pertinent to my effort to locate Wittgenstein's conception of religion, in his early philosophy within the realism–irrealism debate in philosophy of religion: What category (realism or irrealism) can better capture his conception of religion in his early philosophy? The answer that I think to be more compelling is irrealism and more specifically non-realism.

Wittgenstein's conception of religion is non-realistic because it is non-cognitivist. Non-cognitivism in religion, as explained before in a more general way, means religious claims do not express belief (propositional attitude) and so they are not truth apt, i.e. not capable of being true or false. But in the Wittgenstein's view 'Only the proposition has sense',[65] and a sensical language must comply with the limitation of logical form, and the proposition's elements must have reference, since 'a proposition is a picture of reality'.[66] Since religious claims do not comply with the logical forms, and do not have reference, so they are not propositions, and thus his conception of religion in his early philosophy seems to be non-cognitivistic, and therefore neither realistic nor anti-realistic, but non-realistic.

Now, let us turn to Wittgenstein's later conception of religion. As mentioned before, the difference between the early and the later Wittgenstein is usually explained through his shift from 'the picture theory of meaning' in the early Wittgenstein to 'the use theory of meaning' in the later Wittgenstein. The meaning of a word and proposition, in 'the use theory of meaning' is contingent

[60] For an apophatic interpretation of, *inter alia*, the *Tractatus*, see Earl Stanley B. Fronda, *Wittgenstein's (Misunderstood) Religious Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
[61] § 6. 432.
[62] § 6. 44.
[63] J. Mark Lazenby, *The Early Wittgenstein on Religion* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), 59.
[64] § 7.
[65] § 3.3.
[66] § 4.01.

upon the use of the word, and its use is context dependent, and contexts are varied. Language is like a game, nothing binds together the different uses of games. The rules of a game are internal to that game.

There is no essence to a game and, likewise, there is no essence to a 'language game', and therefore there is no such a thing as a general theory of language. Consequently, any kind of general theory of language, including the sort suggested by Wittgenstein himself in the *Tractatus*, is to be discarded. Unlike his early philosophy, now, the exclusive function of the meaningful language is not to describe the world. Language has enormously and irreducibly diverse functions. In *Philosophical Investigations* he writes: 'for *a large* class of cases—though not for *all*—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language'.[67]

What is the consequence of 'the use theory of meaning' for his conception of religion? For him religious language is still significantly different from a fact-stating language, but unlike his early philosophy as represented in the *Tractatus* (or at least unlike its radical positivistic interpretation) there is nothing wrong with religious language. As far as the use and misuse of language are concerned, religious language is as legitimate as scientific language, despite their deep differences.

But how does the religious language game have to be justified and accepted? His answer is that religion is a 'form of life' and 'what has to be accepted, the given, is—one might say—*forms of life*'.[68] What comes at the end as a 'ground' for our language game is not some propositions that seem to us to be immediately true, but the end of 'giving ground' is 'acting'.[69] Our acting as the final ground is neither true nor false as such but it is true *for* actor, and not yet false *for* him/her.[70]

In his 'lectures on religious belief' he explains how any effort made to model religious language game on scientific language game and hence to render religion 'reasonable' or 'unreasonable' in this way is 'ludicrous' and doomed to failure. Religion is neither 'reasonable' nor 'unreasonable', what is unreasonable instead is an apologetic effort to make religion reasonable in the scientific manner.[71] For him, religious faith is not made of doctrines or beliefs in the ordinary

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[67] § 43. All references to *Philosophical Investigations* are to this translation: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th edition (Chichester/Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[68] *Philosophical Investigations*, § 345.

[69] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), § 204.

[70] *On Certainty*, §§ 205, 206.

[71] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 57–59. Cf. 'Religion says: Do this!–Think like that! but it cannot justify this and it only need try to do so to become repugnant; since for every reason it gives, there is a cogent counter-reason. It is more convincing to say: "Think like this! –however strange it may seem.–" Or: "Won't you do this?–repugnant as it is.–"'. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, Heikki Nyman, and Alois Pichler, trans. Peter Winch, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 34.

sense, but religion is a 'passionate commitment'[72] and a 'trusting'[73] to a language game and form of life.

The Wittgenstein's later conception of religion, as far as I can see, has been interpreted in at least four different ways. According to one interpretation, his emphasis on religion, as a phenomenon that fundamentally revolves around 'acting' and 'passionate commitment' and not as 'doctrine' and 'belief', is not suggested to make religion empty from its cognitive content and thereby to reduce it to mere passion and expressive function that is immune from any outer criticisms. Rather, the suggestion is to go beyond the dichotomous portrayal of religion as either metaphysical belief or mere passion. Wittgenstein's emphasis on the centrality of 'praxis' in religion does not make him, according to this interpretation, non-cognitivist and fideist.[74]

According to the second interpretation, Wittgenstein's conception of religion amounts to taking religion as neither true nor false, and even not capable of being true or false, hence it is non-cognitivistic.[75] His conception is, consequently, fully fideistic in the sense that religion, i.e. Christianity, cannot be defended or rejected doctrinally, since it is fundamentally 'doctrineless'.[76]

According to the third interpretation, although his conception of religion is neither non-cognitivistic nor fideistic it finally leads to a kind of relativism called 'relativism of distance'. Relativism of distance was initially suggested and defended by Bernard Williams (1929-2003), an English moral philosopher who draws a sharp distinction between 'notional' and 'real' confrontations. According to this kind of relativism, when one's confrontation is not real but notional, i.e. when going over to the view of other side is not a live and open option, then one cannot appraise the view of other side.[77] Accordingly, those for whom religion is not a live option cannot appraise religion.

Finally, according to the fourth interpretation, Wittgenstein's later conception of religion can be interpreted as neither non-cognitivistic nor relativistic not even fideistic—in the sense that religious belief is taken to be *thoroughly* immune to rational evaluation. Rather, his conception can

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[72] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 73.

[73] Ibid., 82.

[74] Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. Ch. 4.; idem "Wittgensteinian Approaches to Religion," in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy (London/New York: Routledge, 2015), 63–73. John Cottingham, "The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy," in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P. M. S. Hacker*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman (Oxford /New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 203–27.

[75] John Hyman, "The Gospel According to Wittgenstein," in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–11. See also Michael Scott, "Realism and Anti-Realism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy (London: Routledge, 2015), 211.

[76] Kai Nielsen, "Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians on Religion," in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 137–66.

[77] Martin Kusch, "Disagreement and Picture in Wittgenstein's 'Lectures on Religious Belief,'" in *Image and Imaging in Philosophy, Science, and the Arts*, ed. Richard Heinrich et al., vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Ontos-Verl, 2011), 59–72.

be interpreted as 'quasi fideism' since the very foundational doctrine of the existence of God is regarded to be immune to rational support or denial (hence its *fideism*), but other less fundamental religious beliefs are taken to be subject to rational evaluation (hence its *quasi* fideism).[78]

It is beyond the purpose of this chapter to come up with the adjudication in favour of any of these interpretations. Suffice it here to say that if later Wittgenstein's conception of religion is non-cognitivistic or fully fideistic (second interpretation) or relativistic (third interpretation) then it is non-realistic. It is because a significant element of realism, as characterized above, is the capability of being objectively true or false, while non-cognitivism, fideism, and relativism, each of which is in their own way against objective truth aptness. Whether or not contextualist interpretation (first interpretation) and quasi-fideistic interpretation (fourth interpretation) of Wittgenstein's later conception of religion are realistic is also a matter of debate in its own place.

So far, I have talked about Wittgenstein's own conceptions of religion. But talking about Wittgenstein's conceptions of religion without talking, even briefly, about the contribution of D. Z. Phillips in this regard seems to me like talking about the New Testament without talking about Paul. Phillips (1934-2006), a Welsh philosopher, is probably the most important Wittgenstein-influenced philosopher of religion. According to Phillips religious faith is fundamentally about how to live a form of life, rather than about believing or disbelieving, irrespective of our form of life, how and whether certain propositions hold true.

It may initially seem to be a trivial and unproblematic claim to make. Almost no one claims that religion is only a sum total of doctrines and beliefs, and that religious praxis has no role to play in religion. What is innovative in Phillips's claim, however, is that *à la* Wittgenstein (or what Phillips takes to be the Wittgenstein's position) he believes that the truth or falsity, and sensical or nonsensicality of the claim 'God exists', or any other religious claims are not logically to be determined prior to a religious language game. It is only *within* a religious language game that all these questions can or cannot arise and find their due answers: 'As soon as one has religious discourse one has a theology which determines what it will be sensible to say and what it will be nonsensical to say within that religious discourse without being prior to it.'[79]

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[78] Duncan Pritchard, "Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145–59.

[79] D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 4. Compare it with the similar but more bold points made by Peter Winch (1926-1997) another Wittgenstein-influenced philosopher: 'criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life. It follows that one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such. For instance, science is one such mode and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself. […] we cannot sensibly say that either the practice of science itself or that of religion is either illogical or logical; both are non-logical.' Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*, second ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 100–1. See also his 'preface to the second edition' in the same book for his later qualification of the phrases just quoted, although he still thinks that his understanding of the relation between logic and forms of life is 'basically right' (p. XV).

Logic is not prior to language games, including religious language games, because for Phillips belief and practice are inseparable in such a way that if one's belief in God is not genuinely reflected in one's life in the form of prayer, praise and so on, then one does not really believe in God. But for realists believe in, for example, the proposition 'God exists' is logically prior to the role it may play in religious life.[80] Although for realists this priority does not necessarily amount to the total detachment of belief from action, it repudiates the identification of the nature of belief and praxis suggested by Phillips based on his interpretation of Wittgenstein.

Phillips also argues that when a religious believer talks about God, He/She/It is not talking factually. Factual talking, according to him, is tantamount to talking about an *object* which may or may not exist, while God is not depicted religiously as an object that may or may not exist. God rather is depicted as a necessary being that is impossible not to exist, since God is not an object 'God' does not refer to any object and thus religious language is not factive.[81] He likens religious language to grammar. As grammar is not true or false, but it is a criterion for what is the right and wrong way of using a language, likewise religious language game is not itself true or false but it sets the rules for how to talk properly about God: "God is love' is not a description of God that may be true or false, but a grammatical rule for one use, albeit a primary one, of the word 'God".[82]

What one can gather from the elucidation of his position is that Phillips is not a realist—at least not in the sense characterized above in this chapter; and neither Phillips himself, nor his commentators have taken him to be so. But does this necessarily mean that he is a non-realist? Not so, at least according to Phillips' characterization of his own philosophy, as well as some of his commentators. However, his position seems at least *prima facie* rather similar to non-realism. It is because religious language for him is not supposed to refer to an object outside a religious form of life,[83] and philosophy has no role to play in theoretical appraisal of religion, but its role is confined only to rectify misunderstandings concerning (religious) language game.[84]

Despite these similarities, however, Phillips distances himself from both realists and non-realists alike, taking both to be confused: 'theological non-realism is as empty as theological

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[80] P. F. Bloemendaal, *Grammars of Faith: A Critical Evaluation of D. Z. Philips's Philosophy of Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 337.

[81] Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, 61–63.

[82] D. Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 146.

[83] '[A] man […] says that God has become a reality in his life. Has this come about by his discovering an object? Hardly. What has happened is that he has found God *in* a praise, a thanksgiving, a confessing and an asking which were not his before'. D. Z. Phillips, *Religion without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 181.

[84] 'Once philosophy has shown the fundamental roles played by basic propositions in our ways of thinking, its task is over.' Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, 124. Cf. 'To ask whether God exists is not to ask a theoretical question. If it is to mean anything at all, it is to wonder about praising and praying; it is to wonder whether there is anything in all that. This is why philosophy cannot answer the question "Does God exist?" with either an affirmative or a negative reply'. Phillips, *Religion without Explanation*, 181.

realism."[85] Religious non-realists, in his critique of non-realism, have taken religious realism for granted. They also think that to detach belief from the 'fruits of belief' is possible. The only difference non-realists have with religious realists is that for non-realists it is no longer tenable in the modern or post-modern time to defend religion realistically. For them it is not *in principle* unintelligible to be religious realist but given the criticisms levelled against religious belief in modern philosophy influenced by modern sciences, it is *no longer* a viable option.

But Phillips's position (and he thinks Wittgenstein's too) is that realism in general, including religious realism, is not in principle an intelligible option, since it is based, among other things, on the wrong detachment of belief from 'the fruits of belief' in such a way that belief is taken by realists to be a mental state that is different from the commitments that the belief may bring about, while for Phillips the essence of belief is to be found in action.[86] Therefore, unlike a self-proclaimed non-realist such as Don Cupitt (1934) an English philosopher of religion,[87] Phillips takes his own position to be non-revisionary, in the sense that he does not want to reconcile religion with the requirements of modern and post-modern time—what for example Cupitt, according to Phillips, has set out to do so—rather, he wants to describe what he regards to be the 'grammar of faith'.[88] However, Phillips is widely considered to be a non-realist of a certain sort—sometimes referred to as anti-realist but according to our characterization it is meant non-realist as opposed to anti-realist.[89]

2.3.2.3 Don Cupitt and Explicit Non-Realism

Although Wittgenstein and Phillips are self-acclaimed non-realists and they cannot, at least straightforwardly, taken to be non-realist in their conception of religion, Don Cupitt is explicitly non-realist and taken by both his critics and advocates as well as himself to be so. It is worth mentioning, however, that in his early phase of intellectual life he was not yet totally detached from realism. For instance, in his book *The Leap of Reason* (1976) he tried to strike a balance between on the one hand relativism, subjectivism, pluralism, and scepticism which in one way or another paved

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[85] Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, 35.
[86] Ibid., 36.
[87] Cupitt will be addressed in detail in the next section of this chapter.
[88] For a defence of this reading of Phillips's conception of religion, see Mikel Burley, *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life: Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), ch. 4. Hermen Kroesbergen, "Beyond Realism and Non-Realism: Religious Language-Games and Reality," *NGTT* 55, no. 1 (2014): 189–204.
[89] See e.g. Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God* (London: Fount, 1999), 59. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Practices of Belief: Selected Essays*, ed. Terence Cuneo, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 350–71. Hilberg, *Religious Truth and Religious Diversity*, 84ff. Paul A. Macdonald, *Knowledge and the Transcendent: An Inquiry Into the Mind's Relationship to God* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 69ff. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 165 n.37.

the way for man's freedom, and on the other hand the absolutist dogmatism epitomized in classical Christianity. The middle way he suggests is 'transcendence': '[p]recisely because we can grasp what relativism is and asserts, we can transcend it.'[90]

The kind of transcendence he suggests is highly different from its traditional Christian sense in which the transcendent is embedded in the personal God. He, rather, depicts transcendence as the only religious way out of the trap of relativism or dogmatism, nonetheless it is not embodied in a personal god or a cluster of fixed beliefs. But this transcendence is not purely subjective, since 'a purely subjective understanding of the transcendent is, it seems to me, anarchy and pessimism.'[91] Cupitt formerly (at least in 1971-1979) seemed to be close to a somewhat apophatic theology[92] which can be regarded as a hybrid position[93] between realism and irrealism: 'The true religion is the religion which declares itself untrue, which asserts the relativity of its own symbolism and says that God is infinitely greater than our highest ideas of him.'[94]

The role of religion is, hence, nothing but to point towards something/someone higher which/who is unattainable, inexplicable and inaccessible, but can be pointed out through an anthropocentric language. This language is not able to depict God as He/She/It is, but in order to talk about God adopting such a language is inevitable. Specifically, Jesus Christ's role is to point toward the transcendent. Nevertheless, Cupitt's early position was still not completely pluralistic, since not all religions were taken to be equal in this regard, for he still thought that theistic religions are ethically superior to non-theistic religions. He goes even further reinterpreting 'the finality of Jesus' in terms of his middle way between relativism and absolutism. Jesus is final not because of being an 'absolute historical incarnation of God' which according to Cupitt is metaphysically impossible and ethically tyrannical, but 'because of the way he bears witness to what is final and unsurpassable'.[95]

Here, I have put emphasis on Cupitt's early thought since his early phase of thought has been either widely ignored or very briefly alluded to in the literature dealing with his thought,[96] whilst I think his later thoughts can be better understood if set against the backdrop of his early thoughts. Cupitt's writing style is notoriously more rhetorical than argumentative, and he has not

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[90] Don Cupitt, *The Leap of Reason* (London: SCM, 1976), 66.
[91] Ibid., 96.
[92] Robert Andrew Cathey, *God in Postliberal Perspective: Between Realism and Non-Realism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 186. Derek Johnston, *A Brief History of Theology: From the New Testament to Feminist Theology* (London: Continuum, 2008), 272.
[93] This position shall be explained later in this chapter.
[94] Cupitt, *The Leap of Reason*, 96.
[95] Ibid., 129.
[96] See, for instance Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Volume 2: Reality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 249–57. McGrath only mentions without elaborating or adding any reference that 'Cupitt has gradually shifted from a form of critical realism (which recognizes that what we say about God never fully represents the reality of God) to an anti-realism (which insists that there is no objective reality 'out there': all our language about 'reality' - including God - is really about ourselves' p. 252.

been fully engaged in dialogue with other philosophers and theologians, and has rarely been responsive to his critics. However, his early work, as well as his first non-realistic book *Taking Leave of God* (first published in 1980), which is written under the influence of Kant,[97] was still to a certain extent argumentative, and he was still engaged in dialogue with realist philosophers and theologians, and was sensitive and responsive to some criticisms.

In a Feuerbachian spirit, the later Cupitt has made an explicit shift from talking of and defending an objective God, to talking of God as nothing but an objectification of our highest aspirations and ideals. He no longer thinks that thinking of a purely subjective understanding of God and of the non-existence of objective God bring about anarchy and pessimism. Rather, they prepare us for spiritual freedom, namely, to be free from an outside authority dictating what is right and wrong, the authority who is watching us and punishing us in the hereafter for our wrongdoings. Spiritual freedom requires us to get rid of not only the objective God but also more generally the objective reality of any kind altogether. Hence, we witness a combination of religious non-realism, and global metaphysical anti-realism. There is no reality, religious or otherwise, outside and independent of human language. Rather than being shaped and determined by reality, language creates reality of any sort.[98]

It is important to focus on an argument Cupitt presents for his non-realism which is quite close to what Phillips presented for his position, although as we saw above, Phillips refrains from equating his position with Cupitt. Cupitt thinks that a religiously adequate God must be perfect, and it requires total commitment on the part of believer. But perfect God, if taken factually, is impossible since there is no convincing evidence for it, and moreover perfect God is conceptually incoherent. Therefore, God is to be taken as the personification of our highest ideals in order to make room for total commitment without which religious practice has not taken seriously: 'the only religiously adequate God cannot exist. The world being what it is, he has to *be* ideal to function *as* the religious ideal'.[99]

But, from a non-realistic point of view, what are we to make sense of numerous references to what seems to be an objective God in religious language and practice (worship and prayer)? Since faith is nothing but 'an act of the will' any talk of objective God in religious language is to be interpreted non-realistically, i.e. it is 'as if' it refers to an objective God: 'It is *as if* faith is objectively

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[97] Colin Crowder, "Introduction," in *God and Reality, Essays on Christian Non-Realism*, ed. Colin Crowder (London: Mowbray, 1997), 8.

[98] 'We have come to see that there can be for us nothing but the world that are constituted for us by own languages and activities. All meaning and truth and value are man-made and could not be otherwise.' Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London: BBC, 1984), 20.

[99] Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2001), 122.

oriented towards an unknowable transcendent' (emphasis added).[100]

It is worth mentioning that unlike what Phillips takes to be Cupitt's position, Cupitt is not saying that since the advancement of modern science and development of modern philosophies have rendered talk and defence of objective God impossible, then people in modern and postmodern time must turn to non-realism to make room for faith in their time. What Cupitt says is that modern science and philosophy helped us become more aware of the fact that 'religious truth is subjectivity'.[101] But Cupitt thinks non-realism is not atheism in disguise,[102] rather it is a rediscovery of what Jesus tried to tell us about Kingdom which is to be found here and now, and not in the hereafter, because there is no hereafter; although Apostolic faith later on turned the teachings of Jesus Christ into a metaphysical claim.[103]

As the former Cupitt appealed to negative theology to back his hybrid position between realism and irrealism, the latter Cupitt appeals to it to back his non-realism. Interpreted in this way, from an apophatic perspective religious realism is tantamount to 'idolatry', for it fixes religious feeling upon an object, while faith is not fixed and not object-centred.[104] Although Cupitt's thought has undergone some changes after its non-realistic turn in the 1980s, its linguistic constructivism (that everything is created by language) and his non-realist theology have remained mainly intact since then.[105]

Now, it is time to ask the main question of this chapter: Is Cupitt's conception of religion non-realistic? And the answer is positive. It is because the existence of God and more generally religious language are clearly taken by him to be totally dependent upon the way human beings think, talk, feel, and act. Religion for him is the 'practice of living', and not in any sense a theory of world,[106] and hence its 'belieflessness'[107] and 'non-cognitivistic'.[108]

2.3.3 Realism about Religion

Religious realism can be divided into 'direct realism' and 'indirect realism'. Both direct and indirect realists basically agree on the ontological, semantic, and epistemological components of realism in

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[100] Ibid., 150.
[101] Ibid., 180.
[102] Ibid., xix.
[103] Don Cupitt, *The Last Testament* (London: SCM, 2012), 14 & 26.
[104] Don Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 143.
[105] Crowder, "Introduction," 9.
[106] Don Cupitt, "Free Christianity," in *God and Reality, Essays on Christian Non-Realism*, ed. Colin Crowder (London: Mowbray, 1997), 20.
[107] Ibid., 21.
[108] Ibid., 16. See also Don Cupitt, *Is Nothing Sacred?: The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion - Selected Essays* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), xiii.

their philosophical treatment of religion. That is to say, both groups hold that the existence of God is to be taken independently of us, and our talk of God is cognitive, and at least some of our propositions about God are known or justifiably believed to be objectively (approximately) true. The difference between them, however, seems to be on some further epistemological and semantic questions: how do we know or justifiably believe that some of our propositions about God are (approximately) true? Can our talk of God be literal, or is it thoroughly metaphorical or symbolic? As the title shows, direct realists take this position that our knowledge of God can be significantly direct and unmediated, and also our talk of God can be significantly literal rather than being irreducibly and thoroughly figurative.

2.3.3.1 Direct Realism about Religion

William P. Alston (1921-2009), an American philosopher of religion, language, and epistemologist, is probably one of the most important proponents of direct realism about religion in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Direct realism is also called, sometimes rather pejoratively, naïve realism. As, however, we shall see shortly, direct realism in Alston's philosophy is anything but naïve. In this section, therefore, I will be focusing on his position as a highly sophisticated representative of direct realism about religion. Alston's answer to the above-mentioned semantic question is that God can be talked about, at least partially, literally without theoretical difficulties. In order to defend this position, he develops a sophisticated theory of the literal talk of God.

Like any other realists Alston makes a clear distinction between religious language and the referent of religious language which in monotheistic religions is essentially taken to be God. He does not deny that human language falls inherently short of talking about God as God is, due specifically to God's simplicity, and more generally divine transcendence. However, Alston's view on the inherent limitation of human language has not led him to take the common position that our talk of God is completely metaphorical or symbolic. It is because he thinks pan-symbolism and being pan-metaphoric in any domain including religious domain, leads to a dilemma:

> Though irreducible metaphors seem to promise a way of combining the denial of any literal predication in theology with the preservation of significant theological truth claims, this fair promise dissipates on scrutiny like mist before the morning sun. Either the panmetaphoricist abandons the aspiration to significant truth claims or he revokes the ban on literal predictability.[109]

Alston argues that pan-symbolists, such as Paul Tillich (1886-1965), a German-American Protestant theologian and philosopher, cannot be both cognitivist and pan-metaphoricist since the

[109] William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 37.

latter undermines the former and vice versa. It is because according to him the content of any metaphor can be expressed, in principle at least, in part literally. For instance, taken pan-metaphorically the proposition "God is love" implies that the literal interpretation of this proposition would be false. But Alston thinks that like any other metaphors the metaphorical predicate term 'love' when attributed to God can be expressed, like any other biblical metaphors such as 'rock', 'shepherd', 'lamb', 'fortress', 'door' and 'way', at least in part, literally.

Alston argues that there must be strata of literal truth claims to be contained in metaphors, including religious metaphors. One stratum of literal truth is that it must be literally true that exemplar and subject are sufficiently similar, otherwise the metaphor fails to be a useful metaphor. If, on the one hand, what we understand from the God's attributes and acts and, on the other hand, what we understand from the requirements of a loving relationship have nothing to do with each other, then "God is love" is not a useful metaphor.[110]

So far, Alston argued for the unavoidability of literal truth claims in metaphorical language, including religious metaphors. This implies either God can be spoken of, at least to some extent, literally, or God cannot be spoken of at all. But this has not thus far been established that God can be talked about literally. The main question that may hinder literal talk of God is this: how can God be spoken of literally when, on the one hand, God is transcendent and, on the other hand, human language is deeply embedded in the bodily modes of being?

Alston's claim is not only that God can be talked about 'extrinsically' (e.g., 'I am thinking of God right now'), or 'negatively' (e. g., 'God is not corporeal'), but also, and more importantly, 'intrinsically', namely one can positively talk about God's acts (e.g. 'God forgives repentant people'), and God's attributes (e.g., 'God is just'). Alston is specifically concerned with whether 'personalistic intrinsic predicates' (PIP for short, Alston called it P-predicates) can be literally attributed to God. By attributing PIP he means attributing those predicates applicable to a 'personal agent', a person with intentions, plans and purposes, guided by knowledge or belief, who is capable of communicating with other agents.[111] PIP seems very close to the attributes of God in Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions.

His main argument for the possibility of attributing PIP to God is that it is true that we come to attach meaning to the linguistic terms through learning what people would do with the language. But from this fact it does not follow that we can only attribute personalistic terms (e.g. commanding, forgiving, creating, etc.) to God if they are literally true of God, exactly in the same

[110] Ibid., 27ff. For a short and good commentary on this important part of Alston's book, see: William P. Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993). See also Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Inquiring about God: Volume 1, Selected Essays*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 112-16.
[111] Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, 41.

sense that they are literally true of human beings. For example, it is not the case that the PIP of 'speech' cannot be attributed literally and truly to God, unless it is attributed in the same sense that is attributed to human speech. If it were the case then the attribute of speech would not be literally and truly attributable to God, since human speech requires specific organs that incorporeal God lacks.[112]

How we can literally and truly then talk about God partially depends on whether and how to attribute mental PIPs to God. There are two main theories about how to define mental states: the 'Private paradigm' view, and 'logical connectionism' (LC). According to the Private paradigm view, appealing to inner experience is sufficient to define mental states, and there is no need to define mental states in terms of overt behaviours. According to this view, mental states can be literally attributed to God. According to LC, however, there is a logical (conceptual) connection between action-related concepts, and overt action or behaviour. According to a version of LC, however, bodily movement is required for the definition of action-related concepts. If this account of LC is defensible, then, since God is incorporeal, the literal attribution of the mental state-related concepts, such as 'will' and 'belief' to God would be impossible.

Alston then argues against this account of LC. He tries to show that there are some action-related concepts, such as 'commanding', 'forgiving', 'making' and so on, into which no bodily movement is built. It is not only the case that bodily movements are not built into some action-related concepts, such as commanding, but it is also the case that for example in order to command one need not necessarily have bodily movement: 'we can conceive of agents, corporeal or otherwise, such that things other than their bodies (if any) are under their direct voluntary control.'[113] Therefore, it is conceivable that these agents can act without bodily movement.

So far, Alston argued that there is no philosophical problem in attributing the mental state-related concepts, such as will and belief, and also in attributing the action-related concepts, such as 'commanding', 'making', and 'forgiving' to a non-corporeal being such as God; Since no bodily movements are necessarily built into the mental state-related and action-related concepts. If it is so, he concludes that, then true literal talk of God is in principle *possible*. This is his theory of religious discourse.

One might accept Alston's analysis of the nature of religious discourse and thereby concede that there is, in principle, no bar to talk literally of God but still resist that one can know God by arguing that God's transcendence is such that we cannot know whether our literal or figurative talk of God is true or false of God. Or one might say if we can know God or refer to God it is only

[112] Ibid., 45.
[113] Ibid., 61.

through arguments, prophets' revelation, religious traditions and cultures, and hence it is only an indirect knowledge and referring. Alternatively, one might suggest that we can ascertain whether or not our talk of God is true or false, but it may turn out that all of our descriptions of God are false, one might then conclude that in such a situation we necessarily fail to refer to God, since our descriptions of God are all false.

Alston does not intend to deny the indirect ways of knowing or referring to God. His intention is first to show that in order to refer to God one need not have a *description* through which to fix the reference that is made. In other words, direct reference to God is, in principle, possible. And secondly, he is willing to show that direct experience of God is also possible. Since his theory of reference is (I think) important for understanding his religious epistemology, let me first explain briefly his theory of reference, and then we can turn to his religious epistemology.

In order to make a case for his 'direct reference' theory, Alston criticizes the 'descriptivist theory of reference', which is an indirect theory of reference. Alston focuses on referring to proper names, such as me referring to my wife 'Reihaneh'. According to a version of descriptivism, in order to fix the reference to a proper name one has to be ready to come up with a list of descriptions that uniquely picks up the proper name; it is the only way, according to descriptivists, that reference is fixed. For example, when I refer to my wife with her name 'Reihaneh' I have to be ready, if I am asked, to come up with a list of descriptions that uniquely fixes my reference to her; for example I have to be able to say that she is from Iran, she got an MA in comparative philosophy, she has two daughters, I am her husband, and so on. Alston denies that this is the only way to refer to a proper name.

I will illustrate his position thus: Suppose in a party you want to show a guest to your friend. You may say: 'Do you know the guy over there eating mushrooms?' And your friend understands to whom you are referring and replies: 'No, I don't.' Further suppose that the one to whom you were successfully referring is actually not yet a man, but somebody who has recently undergone sex reassignment surgery and changed her gender from male to female, but it takes time for her body to be completely reassigned. Moreover, the food she seems to be eating is not mushrooms but something similar, called tubers. And also, she is not actually eating it because she hates tubers but does not want anyone to know this, and so she is only pretending to be eating it. Finally, suppose there is a guy in another corner of the party who is actually eating mushrooms. In such a situation, you have successfully referred to the one you intended to refer and not anyone else in the party, although your set of descriptions has been almost completely false. If it were the case that a set of descriptions fixed a reference and not your direct encounter with the referent, then you would inadvertently refer to the second guest in the other corner of the party, because he

is the only one there who satisfies your set of descriptions.[114]

Similarly, Alston argues that the encounter with God could be possible through communal worship and prayer within a religious tradition which fixes the reference to God and not necessarily through a set of descriptions. This entails that different religions, and different denominations within a religion, might have irreconcilably different descriptions of God, but given the genuine encounter of at least the founder(s) of their religions or denominations with God, these religions or denominations could refer to the same referent.

This entails that for example when Christians refer to the Triune God, and Muslims refer to the non-Triune God it is possible that, given the genuineness of the experiences of at least the founders of these religions, they refer to the same God despite their presumably irreconcilable descriptions of God. The link between Alston's theory of reference, and his epistemology of religious experience is this: without direct experience there is no direct reference 'When one ostensively indicates X as the referent, one is perceiving X'.[115]

Now we can turn to Alston's epistemology of religious experience. In his magnum opus *Perceiving God* his main claim is that there is no philosophical bar to a direct experience of God, and also to that experience being a direct *prima facie* epistemic justification for religious beliefs about divine intrinsic properties, i.e. God's acts (e.g. 'God will forgive us'), and properties (e.g. God's power, love). He calls these beliefs M-beliefs (M for manifestation). He argues that the nature of (putative) religious experience or non-sensory experience of God is structurally parallel to the perception of physical objects in 'sense perception' (SP). In the veridical cases of SP there are:

(1) a perceiver,

(2) what is perceived (perception),

(3) the process of perception,

(4) an object of perception.

If there is God, and God is among the causal chains of what is perceived in 'mystical perception' (MP), then the parallel structure can also be claimed for MP. Like SP, in MP the perceiver (putatively) experiences something that directly appears, or presents Him/Her/Itself, to the perceiver, something the perceiver might express in terms like 'God gave me courage'. He argues that it is not justified to take this kind of experience as a purely subjective feeling which is only given *religious* expression.[116]

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[114] The details of this example are entirely mine, but Alston quotes a somewhat similar example from Donnellan: Ibid., 114.

[115] Ibid., 108.

[116] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 16.

He then goes on to show that every effort to demonstrate the epistemic reliability[117] of forming beliefs based on direct sense perception (he criticizes the indirect theories of sense perceptions) is doomed to failure. It is so, because these efforts turn out to be either circular—namely it presupposes the reliability of forming beliefs based on sense perception to argue for the epistemic reliability of forming that kind of belief—or to be unable to demonstrate the reliability of sense perception even in a circular way.[118]

Should we then become sceptic about the epistemic reliability of sense perception? Alston suggests an indirect way out of the problem of reliability of forming beliefs based on sense perception. He brings into the scene the concept of 'doxastic practice', arguing that unless otherwise shown it is *practically* rational to engage in a doxastic practice; then he concludes that the practical rationality of committing to a doxastic practice shows that it is an *epistemically* rational commitment, therefore established doxastic practices are epistemically reliable.

I will explain his argument in more detail. We form our beliefs based upon our doxastic practices, a system of belief-producing habits and mechanism such as introspection, intuition, memory, reasoning, and so on. These are established and basic doxastic practices. Alston argues that all socially established doxastic practices are to be rationally acceptable unless proven otherwise.[119] This kind of rationality is practical, and the reason for accepting the practical rationality of socially established practices is that engaging in them is so firmly rooted in our lives so as to make them unavoidable.

Even if it were a serious possibility not to form our beliefs based on sense perception, introspection, and other socially established doxastic practices, any attempt to defend that possibility would again turn out to be circular. If successful, however, this argument only shows the *practical* rationality of doxastic practices. It is still far from the epistemic reliability, since 'the rationality of a practice does not *entail* its reliability'.[120] It is because these practices could be practically rational but not reliable, i.e. not likely to yield true beliefs.

Although Alston denies that the very practical rationality of SP or other socially established doxastic practices are in and of themselves the evidence of their epistemic reliability, he argues that *committing* to the practical rationality of SP and yet not subscribing to its reliability is incoherent.[121] Therefore, he provides an indirect argument for the reliability of SP and other socially established doxastic practices.

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[117] Epistemic reliability is taken by him to be what is indicative of the truth of a belief.
[118] Alston, *Perceiving God*, Ch. 3. For a more detailed account, see Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception*.
[119] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 153.
[120] Ibid., 178.
[121] Ibid., 179ff.

But, how is this defence of the reliability of SP and other socially established doxastic practices related to the reliability of mystical perception (MP), and consequently the prima facie justification of religious beliefs that are (at least partially) based on MP? The relevance, according to Alston, is that the argument for the reliability of SP and other socially established doxastic practices could also work for MP. Focusing on the Christian mystical perception (CMP) he makes the case for the claim that CMP is a socially doxastic practice not dissimilar to other practices such as SP, rational intuition, testimony and so on. Like SP, then the indirect link between practical rationality of CMP and its reliability is established. The result is that CMP yields *prima facie* justification for religious beliefs.[122]

To sum up, Alston argues that God can be, at least partially, talked about literally and univocally, and also God can be referred to directly, and finally he argues that God can be experienced directly, and this direct experience provides direct *prim facie* justification for some main religious beliefs in the absence of defeaters.

2.3.3.2 Indirect Realism about Religion

Indirect realism, better known as critical realism,[123] shares the ontological, semantic and epistemological components of general realism about religion. But for indirect realists, unlike direct realists, knowledge of God is, in a significant sense, a mediated knowledge. According to them, that which is directly known is not the same as the known object but, in successful cases, it is its approximately true representation. Indirect realists tend to bring critical insights regarding human cognitive limitations into their realistic bearing, while holding that our mediated conception of reality should be put under severe scrutiny to see if it represents reality truthfully; that is why they are generally called 'critical' realists. Indirect realists think any kind of claim to knowledge, including scientific or theological knowledge, could be mistaken. Knowledge is not pure, and can contain unintended interference of natural and social distorted elements in this process,[124] therefore criticism of knowledge is essential.

'Critical realism' as a movement in the last quarter of Twentieth Century philosophy of (social) science is usually associated with the works of Roy Bhasker (1944-2014) an Indo-British philosopher.[125] Until recently, however, religious critical realism developed almost completely

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[122] Ibid., Ch.5.

[123] As I preferred to use 'direct' rather than 'naive' realism, likewise here I will continue to call this position, with the more dry but neutral label, 'indirect realism' rather than 'critical realism'.

[124] Jose Lopez and Garry Potter, "After Postmodernism: The New Millennium," in *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, ed. Jose Lopez and Garry Potter (London: Continuum, 2001), 9.

[125] For a good introduction to his philosophy, see Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994).

independent of Bhaskar's critical realism and his likeminded colleges.[126] In the remainder of this section I shall focus on a prominent religious critical realist, Alister McGrath (b. 1953), who is influenced by Bhaskar's realism. McGrath, from Northern Ireland, is an Anglican priest, theologian, scientist, intellectual historian, and apologist.

McGrath, specifically but not exclusively, in his three-volume work called *A Scientific Theology*,[127] and in a book-length addendum called *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology*,[128] is concerned with the relationship between the natural and humans sciences (scientific knowledge), and theology (theological knowledge). The basic assumption of his 'scientific theology' is that 'there can be a fundamental synergy between the working methods and assumptions of the natural sciences, and Christian theology'.[129]

McGrath's philosophical theory of science, as well as his philosophical theory of religion are both realistic—albeit indirect (critical). On the one hand, he argues against anti-realistic and relativistic theories in philosophy of science, that those taking a reductionist attitude toward science consider it to be thoroughly socially constructed. On the other hand, he argues against those theories that reduce theology to a mere opinion of a closed religious community, or a communal feeling that has nothing to do with the independent reality. McGrath considers theological doctrines and scientific theories, both as different responses to the different layers of the same reality, rather than as disciplines creating reality or totally irrelevant to it.

Influenced by Roy Bhaskar he takes reality to be single but stratified (or multi-layered). This ontological stance, i.e. stratification of reality, paves the way for an indirect realist theory of science and theology which is fundamentally different from logical positivism and postmodernist irrealism in philosophy of science and religion: 'Bhaskar insists that each stratum—whether physical, biological or cultural—is to be seen as 'real', and capable of investigation using means appropriate to its distinctive identity'.[130] The different strata of reality are irreducible to each other and the study of each stratum requires its own method.

Like Bhaskar, McGrath emphasizes the primacy of ontology.[131] Reality is not reducible to our knowledge of reality. The question 'what is it?' cannot be reduced to the question 'what can we know?'. The reduction of ontology to epistemology is what Bhaskar called 'epistemic fallacy'.[132]

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126 Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2012), 9. A relatively recent collection of articles by Bhasker-influenced religious critical realists is Margaret S. Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas V. Porpora, eds., *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God* (London: Routledge, 2004).

127 Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology* Vol. 1: Nature; Vol. 2: Reality; Vol. 3: Theory. London: Continuum, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001–3.

128 Alister E. McGrath, *The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

129 Ibid., 21.

130 McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 2: 217.

131 Ibid., 218–19.

132 Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 2nd Ed (London: Routledge, 2008), 26ff.

One example of committing this fallacy is the verification theory of meaning, elaborated and defended by (at least the early) logical positivists, to the effect that if a non-tautological proposition is not empirically verifiable or falsifiable it is meaningless. This fallacy is related to 'ontic fallacy', that analyses knowledge in terms of a direct relation between a subject and a being. The link between these two fallacies is that when the relationship between a subject and an object (i.e. what is known) is direct, then what is not known does not exist, and thereby ontology reduces to epistemology. These fallacies ignore the contingent, historical and social aspects of knowledge production—aspects seriously emphasized by indirect realists.

For McGrath, *à la* indirect realists, reality is of central significance in determining the method of inquiry. Relatedly, he criticizes *a priori* philosophies, such as the philosophies of Descartes and Kant. His criticism against them is that most *a priori* philosophies and theologies are covertly based on *a posteriori* assumptions such as Kant's philosophy which is based on the Euclidian geometrical axioms and the Newtonian 'pure space'.[133] He concludes that theology like science and philosophy must be *a posteriori*. Hence 'scientific theology' is *a posteriori* theology in which the way divine reality shows itself to us is central in our theologizing about God.[134] Therefore, there are no conclusive deductive proofs of God's existence, and theology is essentially based on divine revelation.

I already mentioned that in making case for his 'scientific theology' McGrath stands between direct realism and postmodern irrealism (radical constructivism). His argument against direct realism is that it does not take enough seriously the inherent situatedness of human cognition, that is, the fact that one's situation in, *inter alia*, society and history considerably affect one's perception and conception of reality. Human knowledge is socially and historically conditioned and there is no direct connection between the knower and the known.

Now, what is his argument against radical constructivists? McGrath's argument, *à la* John Searle (b. 1932), an American philosopher, in Searl's book *The Construction of Social Reality*,[135] is that realism is an inevitable option; since radical constructivists (those who hold that knowledge is not only socially *situated,* but also thoroughly socially *constructed*), are finally obliged to presuppose the truth of realism to get their anti-realistic position going: 'those who argue that things are constructed out of (or in response to) specific contexts, are obliged to suppose that these contexts exist in order to explain the process of construction.'[136]

Based on his theological indirect realistic point of view, McGrath argues against the

[133] McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 2002, 2: 270.
[134] Ibid.
[135] London: Penguin, 1996.
[136] McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 2002, 2: 199.

irrealism of Feuerbach and Cupitt, amongst others. His criticism of Feuerbach is that the latter's explanation of Christianity, as the mere expression of human's highest aspirations projected on to an imaginary personal deity, is only a possible explanation and nothing more. Feuerbach proves nothing against theism; he only delineates a possible explanation, to the effect that God is a human construction, which in and of itself is not theoretically better or worse than the Christian explanation.[137]

His critical stance towards Cupitt is based on a similar observation. McGrath argues that Cupitt has taken a very rhetorical approach while not bothering to argue for his non-realistic position. Moreover, McGrath argues that Cupitt equates realism with a very simplistic version of it, and from the criticism of a simplistic realism he then fallaciously concludes the failure of realism altogether, and thereby he systematically ignores the complex versions of realism.[138]

As natural sciences are to be finally based on reality, scientific theology is to be finally based on divine reality which reveals God, in one way or another, to human beings. But it does not entail that revealed theology runs counter to natural theology. Though revealed theology is not to be isolated from natural theology, natural theology without revealed theology is empty: 'Natural theology cannot become a totally autonomous discipline, independent of revelation, in that it depends for its credibility upon the revealed insight that God is the creator of the natural order.'[139]

This entails that natural theology is logically posterior, and not prior, to revealed theology. Divine revelation comes first, and then comes natural theology to investigate the possibility of knowing God through revelation: 'a scientific theology takes the view that theological reflection paradoxically begins with an actual knowledge of God, and in the light of this, proceeds to inquire as to how this knowledge might be possible.'[140] This runs counter to the kind of natural theology inherited from the Enlightenment in which the possibility of knowing God through revelation is taken to be prior (if not barring) to knowing God through revelation.[141]

2.3.4 The Hybrid Position

So far, I delineated a variety of realist and irrealist theories of religion. But there has remained a significant position that, I think, does not fit well with either realist or irrealist theories of religion as formulated above. That is why I opted for categorizing this position under another category,

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[137] Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Volume 1: Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 209.
[138] McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 2002, 2: 251.
[139] McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 2001, 1: 296.
[140] McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 2002, 2: 269.
[141] For a good treatment of McGrath's scientific theology and its indirect realistic position, see Brian Lee Goard, "Theology and Reality: Critical Realism in the Thought of Alister E. McGrath" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011).

and since this position bears the characteristic of having at the same time some realist and irrealist components I call it the hybrid position.

Among philosophers or theologians whose position can fit well with this hybrid stance, it is most important to mention John Hick (1922-2012), an English philosopher of religion, and Paul Tillich (1886-1965), a German-American philosopher and theologian. Due to the shortage of space and also due to the personal as well as intellectual relationship between Soroush and Hick,[142] I will only be focusing on Hick's position in this section.[143]

In this section I shall mainly argue that Hick's position is a combination of some realist and irrealist components. Hick on the one hand shares with realists this ontological stance that the very existence of God is to be taken independently of us, and also, he minimally shares this semantic position with them that our talk of the very transcendental *existence* of God is fact-stating and cognitive. But he shares with irrealists this semantic posture that our description of God's *acts* and *attributes* are not to be taken cognitively, and our propositions about God's acts and attributes are not *theoretically* either true or false.

For Hick, religious experience justifies religious belief of the owner of that experience. For him religious experience is in principle as reliable as sense perception. As, for instance, I am *prima facie* justified in believing that 'there is a tree before me' when I am experiencing what appears to me to be a tree before me, likewise 'I am in the presence of God' is *prima facie* justified when I am experiencing what appears to me to be God's presence'.[144] This epistemological position seems in principle similar to that of Alston about which I talked in detail before in this chapter. Actually, Alston in basing his epistemology of religion on religious experience, was influenced *inter alia*, by Hick's intellectual efforts in the latter's book *Faith and knowledge* (initially published in 1957, second edition 1966).[145] Although, as I shall mention briefly below, their positions are finally drastically different.

This experientialist approach to epistemology of religion is significantly different from the evidentialist approach. Evidentialism amounts to taking this position that in order to be justified, religious beliefs are to be *finally* based not on religious experience but on some foundational beliefs. But experiential epistemology is finally based on religious experience, and not foundational beliefs:

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[142] This relationship will be explained in chapter 6.

[143] For a similar hybrid position of Paul Tillich, see e.g. Paul Tillich, "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God," *The Christian Scholar* 38, no. 3 (September 1955): 189–97. And here is a similar appraisal that puts Tillich close to what I classified as the hybrid position: 'God, Tillich says (and he says it in many places), is 'Being-Itself '. Furthermore, he insisted that this is a 'non-symbolic' statement and, in fact, the *only* non-symbolic statement we can make about God.' George Pattison, *Paul Tillich's Philosophical Theology: A Fifty-Year Reappraisal* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6.

[144] John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 7.

[145] 'The earliest sustained attempts to work through my ideas on our experience of God were strongly influenced by John Hick's treatment in *Faith and Knowledge* (2d ed., 1966)' Alston, *Perceiving God*, xi.

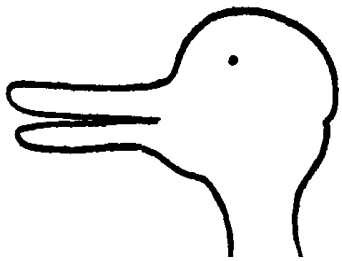
> The main philosophical reason for supposing that such experiences are in fact sometimes veridical is a principle according to which any apparent experience of something is to be regarded as veridical unless we have sufficient reasons to the contrary. Experiences are innocent until proven guilty.[146]

The proponents of this kind of religious epistemology claim we should either regard in principle all kinds of experience veridical until proven false, or, due to the fact that there seems to be in principle no fundamental difference between sense perception and religious experience, we must inevitably lapse into the trap of thorough scepticism considering all kinds of experience (perceptual, divine, or otherwise) unreliable.

Due to the centrality of experience for Hick's epistemology of religion he analyses the process of experiencing. Inspired by Wittgenstein's analysis of the process of seeing according to which every 'seeing' is 'seeing-as', Hick argues that every 'experiencing' is, similarly, 'experiencing-as'. To know better what 'experiencing-as' is, it is appropriate to understand the way Wittgenstein analyses the process of seeing. According to Wittgenstein's analysis the process of seeing is not merely a mechanistic and automatic process, that is to say, it is not the case that the process of seeing is only based on the visual system of an observer, but it is also based on the cognitive equipment and conceptual resources of the observer.

To explain that seeing is not merely the physical process, Wittgenstein illustrates a picture (figure 1 below) in which one can see the picture of a rabbit's head when one looks at it from the right, or alternatively the picture of a duck's head when looking at it from the left. The question worth posing is: when one has not yet seen the picture as a, for example, rabbit's head, does one see, physically speaking, something less than the time that one suddenly sees it as a rabbit's head? As far as the physical process of seeing is concerned, the answer seems negative. What does happen when one exclaims: 'oh I see it as a rabbit's head as well'? It appears that something significantly more than the merely physical process of seeing has happened here. It seems that seeing is always 'seeing as', namely it is a kind of interaction between the observer's cognitive equipment, and conceptual framework, *and* what is being seen.

[146] William P. Alston, "Religious Experience," in *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000).



Figure/chart (1) - rabbit/duck picture

To grasp this interaction better, let it be supposed that a person has not so far seen an animal called rabbit. For such a person it is impossible to see the relevant part of the figure *as* a rabbit's head. Hence, 'seeing as….' is not part of perception per se. And for that reason, it is like seeing and again not like seeing.'[147] Seeing is, hence, theory laden. To see something is to identify what is being seen with a notion that is available in advance in one's conceptual resources and cognitive equipment. The same can be said about other sense perceptions like hearing, tasting, and touching.

Hick tries to expand this theory of sense perception to equally apply it to religious experience:

> To recognise or identify is to be experiencing-as in terms of a concept; and our concepts are social products having their life within a particular linguistic environment. Further, this is as true of natural objects as it is of artefacts. Here, too, to recognise is to apply a concept; and this is always to cognise the thing as being much more than is currently perceptible.[148]

The result of this expansion model is that every experience, including religious experience, is 'experiencing as'. It entails that any kind of religious experience cannot be understood as a *religious* experience unless decoded as such by means of the key notions available in the language, tradition and the conceptual framework of the owner of the experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that, for instance, a Christian experiences God's presence in the form of visiting Jesus as God's son, and a Muslim experiences God's presence in the form of visiting Muhammad as God's prophet. Both use the key-conceptions available in their traditions to interpret what appears to them to be a religious experience.

For Hick, therefore, faith is not a propositional assent to certain beliefs—an understanding of religious faith that is mainly represented in Thomist-Catholic tradition[149]— rather 'Faith is an uncompelled mode of 'experiencing as'—experiencing the world as a place in which we have at all

[147] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 197.
[148] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1990), 41–42.
[149] John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1988), Ch. 1.

times to do with the transcendent God'.[150] Hick makes use of 'experiencing as' to justify pluralist hypothesis against, among others, Alston who argues that religious experience justifies exclusively Christianity.[151] In order to justify his pluralistic position, Hick uses a well-known distinction drawn by German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) between 'noumenon', a thing in itself, and 'phenomenon', a thing as appears to us. Hick considers God, or in his ecumenical terminology 'the Real', to be noumenal thing, that is to say something that is 'beyond the scope of our human conceptual Systems'.[152]

This Kantian position of Hick sets him apart from the full-fledged non-realists who take talk of God as *entirely* dependent on us in such a way that talk of God is not supposed to represent anything independent of what we think, feel, talk, or act. It also sets him apart from the full-fledged anti-realists who consider the proposition 'God exists' as a false or irrational proposition. On the other hand, Hick argues that there indeed are phenomenal things, the real as it is thought and experienced in the course of history in different cultures and traditions. Every experience of the Real is 'experiencing as', and therefore phenomenal.[153] As, Hick concludes, no one has access to the Real in itself. However, as far as religious experiences of the believers prepare them for 'the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness',[154] they are valid. This existential transformation hence works as a criterion for the evaluation of religions.

It entails that the way the Real is depicted in major world religions, as a personal or non-personal God, Unitarian, trinitarian or polytheistic God and so on is not doctrinally but practically valid. In other words, these depictions are not valid because they (even approximately) correspond to the Real in itself, or even because they are supposed to be so, but they are valid because they can change the existential situation of believers from egoism to the reality-centeredness. This analysis of the religious diversity leads Hick to acknowledge religious pluralism as, for him, the only plausible way of interpreting the ubiquitous phenomenon of religious diversity.

Still an exclusivist and/or an inclusivist may ask: what is exactly wrong with exclusivism or inclusivism? Hick's answer is that religious exclusivists and inclusivists cannot justify their claim as far as: 1- they take advantage of religious experience to justify their religious belief, and 2- they have not offered non-circular and non-question-begging criterion by which one can prefer one religion to others:

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150 Ibid., 151.
151 Alston, *Perceiving God*, Ch. 7.
152 Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 15.
153 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 236.
154 Ibid., 240.

> Anyone who maintains that the Christian belief system is true, but that the belief systems of Buddhists, Muslims, and so on are false insofar as they differ from it, has implicitly reversed the original apologetic and is presenting Christian religious experience as the sole exception to the general rule that religious experience gives rise to false beliefs![155]

Hick claims that exclusivists and inclusivists who use religious experience fall into inconsistency. Because on the one hand by taking, in general, religious experience to be valid they justify their religious belief but, on the other hand, they declare unjustifiably only one instance of religious experiences as reliable, which entails religious experience is not, in general, valid.

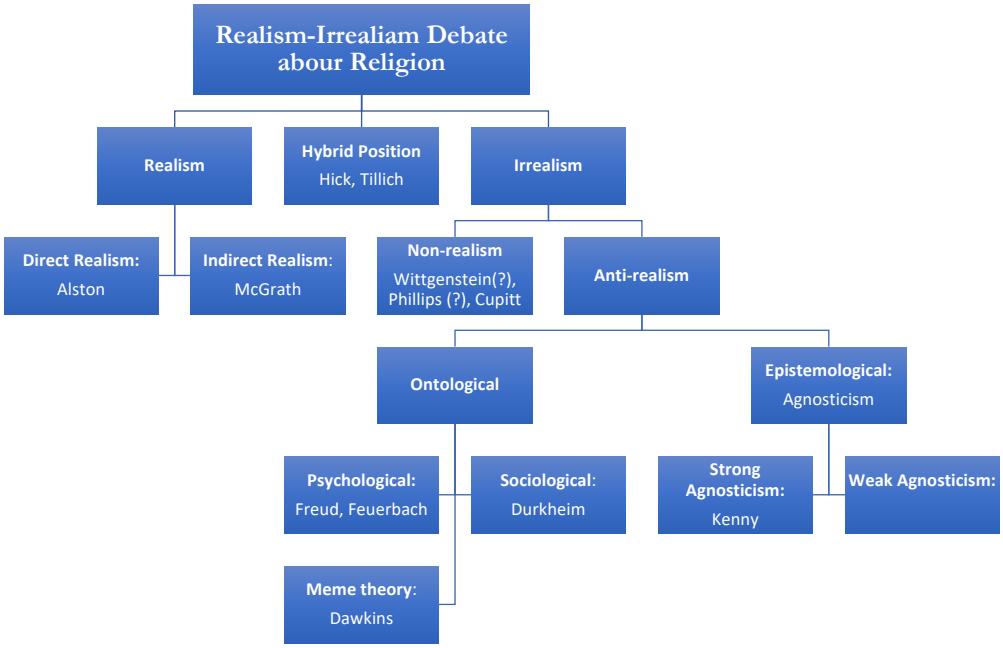
To sum up, John Hick tries to defend a hybrid interpretation of religion involving the amalgamation of some realist as well as some non-realist elements. In order to do that, he appeals to religious experience as a source of knowing the very existence of divine reality. And, on the other hand, he strives to expand, elaborate, and enrich religious experience as a source of knowledge to disclose that recognizing religious experience as a source of knowledge entails acknowledging in principle, all kinds of religious experiences in the major world religions as practically valid, regardless of their mutually exclusive theoretical depictions of the real.

However when it comes to the way different religious traditions describe the ultimate divine reality, he takes a non-realistic approach to the effect that although the very existence of God should be interpreted cognitively and realistically, the way God is interpreted and described could only be practically useful, when it changes the believer from egoism to reality-centeredness.

2.4 Summary

In this chapter I have suggested and elaborated on what I think to be a better taxonomy of the realism-irrealism debate in general, and about religion in relation to the philosophy of religion. This taxonomy provides us with a substantial conceptual toolkit when we embark on criticising philosophically the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation in Chapter 6. Here is a flowchart of this taxonomy:

[155] John Hick, "Religious Pluralism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borchert (Thomson Gale, 2006), 420.



Figure/chart (2) – Realism-Irrealism Debate about Religion

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3 The Problem of Revelation in the History of Muslim Thought

3.1 Introduction

Before focusing on the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation we need to have a general grasp of the different theories of revelation in the history of Muslim thought. For, as will become clear in the next chapter, despite what is widely considered to be the 'idiosyncrasy' of the Soroushian theory of revelation, his theory seems *not* to be irrelevant to, and detached from, the historical theories of revelation in the history of Muslim thought. A scholarly monograph in English, however, that systematically surveys, classifies, compares, analyses, and criticizes different theories of Muslim divine revelation—compared to, for example, H. D. McDonald's work regarding the 19th and 20th century Christian theories of revelation[1]—remains to be written.

In this chapter, nevertheless, some of the most important theories of revelation put forward by some Muslim or Islam-related thinkers will be sketched out. As in the previous chapter, as far as the main purpose of this research is concerned, I shall suggest what I think to be the better taxonomy of these theories. First, the denial theory of revelation, suggested by Zakariyya' al-Razi, will be addressed. Then the approval theories of revelation will be divided into two kinds: theological, and philosophical. The theological theories of revelation presented by some early Mu'tazilis and also Bishr al-Marisi, Ibn Kullab, Ibn Hanbal, and Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, will be briefly explained. Then the philosophical theories of revelation developed by al-Farabi, al-Sijistani, Ibn al-'Arabi, Fazlur Rahman, and Shabestari will be addressed in relatively more detail. The main points to be substantiated are firstly to suggest the contrast between what can be called the 'externalist' versus the 'internalist' theories of revelation, and secondly to determine whether each theory can be categorized as externalist, internalist, or something in between.

In the early centuries of Islam, especially in the 2nd and the 3rd AH/ the 8th and the 9th CE, the phenomenon of revelation turned out to be so problematic that some theologians took, at least polemically, the total denial of revelation quite seriously. As a reaction they wrote some treatises to repudiate the denial of revelation. Therefore, in order to sketch out some significant aspects of the history of theories of revelation in Muslim thought in a more comprehensive way, it seems appropriate to begin, albeit idiosyncratically, with at least a theory that totally rejects, in an intentional and self-acclaimed way, the phenomenon of divine revelation.

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[1] H. D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study, 1860-1960* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963).

This way of addressing the issue of revelation, which takes the denial theory of revelation as itself a theory of revelation, is, however, not common in literature.[2] Besides uncommonness, it may seem problematic to take the denial of revelation as a theory of revelation. This is because, as an example, it may be claimed that normally no one in the literature of the philosophy of religion takes an atheistic argument as a conception of God, since a theistic conception presupposes the very existence of God. Similarly, it might be claimed that no one is to take the wholesale denial of revelation as a theory of revelation.

This probable objection may be responded to as follows: one can, though infrequently, find atheism as being characterized as a conception of God or the divine in the philosophy of religion literature.[3] Moreover, if by 'revelation', when talking about its theories, one means nothing but *what is widely called* revelation, then its denial can also be safely regarded as a theory of revelation.

Now, given this framework let us first turn to the denial theory of divine revelation.

3.2 The Denial Theory of Revelation

3.2.1 Introduction

The denial of Muslim theory of divine revelation and prophecy is a position that the Qur'an itself is quite aware of and sensitive to, in such a way that 'the Qur'anic concept of prophecy is profoundly marked by the experience of opposition.'[4] The Jews of 'Arabia are shown both in the Qur'an, specifically in the Medinan verses, as well as in the Muslim tradition (*sunna*) to be at the forefront of the opposition, especially the theological and even probably to a lesser extent military opposition, to the prophetic and revelatory status of Muhammad. Hence, they received the sternest rebuke by the Qur'an.[5] Secondly, the Meccan pagans (*mushrikun*), although not depicted greatly as religious opponents, were mostly shown to be Muhammad's militant adversaries in such a way that the Qur'an ordained its followers to fight them back severely.[6] Christians were presented in a relatively less negative light,[7] although in the Meccan verses both Christians and Jews were

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[2] *Cf.* e.g.: A. J. Arberry, *Revelation and Reason in Islam* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957) pp. 36-9, here Arberry discuses briefly al-Razi's position on reason and revelation without considering his position as a theory of revelation. For a typically total neglect of al-Razi's position in discussing the theories of divine revelation in Muslim thought, see: William A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977).

[3] *Cf.* e.g., Paul J. Griffiths, "Nontheistic Conceptions of the Divine," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 59–79. In this source the author has treated, among other things, the Buddhist conception of the divine, a religion that, at least in some of its versions, has been widely considered as an atheistic religion.

[4] Marco Schöller, "Opposition to Muhammad," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2003), 576.

[5] See specially Q. 5: 82.

[6] See specially Q. 9: 5 & 36.

[7] Q. 2: 62; 5: 69, 82.

portrayed more favourably.[8]

One of the most important key terms in the Qur'an alluding to the position of the deniers of revelation is the negative use of the phrase 'the stories of the ancients or old fables' (*asatir al-awwalin*) appearing nine times in the Qur'an.[9] In the clearest usage of the term, it reads: 'whenever our revelation is recited to them they say, We have heard all this before—we could say something like this if we wanted—this is nothing but ancient fables.'[10] This verse, accompanied with another verse,[11] has been interpreted in the biography of Muhammad literature (*sira*), which is written more than a century after his death,[12] and in the Qur'anic exegesis literature (*tafsir*) as referring to the counter-revelatory stance of a figure called al-Nadr b. al-Harith.

He was a rich Qurayshi merchant who, before the rise of Islam, was engaged in trade with *al-Hira* (in the south of modern day Iraq) or Fars (Persia).[13] Equipped with, what can be called, the Persian *asatir al-awwalin*, al-Harith is depicted as publicly refuting Muhammad's claim of receiving divine revelation:

> Whenever the apostle sat in an assembly and invited people to God, and recited the Qur'an and warned the Quraysh of what had happened to former peoples, followed him when he got up and spoke to them about Rustum the Hero and Isfandiyar and the kings of Persia, saying, 'By God, Muhammad cannot tell; better story than I and his talk is only of old fables which he has copied as I have.'[14]

Al-Harith's claim was exceedingly dangerous to Muhammad's claim to prophecy. Beside this, the Jewish rabbis of Medina in Muhammad's time asked him some vague questions regarding the history of their forefathers to see whether Muhammad was a genuine prophet (*nabi*) or a fake prophet (*mutanabbi*).[15] Moreover, the Qur'an itself at the end of some story-telling verses adopts a criterion according to which genuine prophets should know the 'unseen' (*al-ghayb*), including the history of previous generations.[16] For example, following the story of Mary, it reads 'This is an account of things beyond your knowledge that We reveal to you [Muhammad]'.[17]

But the claim of al-Harith is that the Qur'anic stories are rather similar to the old stories of

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[8] Q. 22: 17; 61: 14.
[9] Q. 6: 25; 8: 31; 16: 24; 23: 83; 25: 5; 27: 68; 46: 17; 68: 15; 83: 13.
[10] Q. 8: 31. Unless otherwise mentioned, any translation of the Qur'an is taken from: M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān: a new translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[11] 'when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Ancient fables!", Q. 8: 31.
[12] Muhammad died in 11/632 (although the date is somewhat debatable among historians of the early Islam). The first sources widely believed to be the first *sira* now available is the Sira of Muhammad b. Ishaq (d. 150/767). See: Adeien Leites, "Sīra and the Question of Tradition," in *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden; Boston; Koln: Brill, 2000).
[13] Ch Pellat, "Al-Naḍr B. Al-Ḥārith," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 7 (Leiden & New York: E.J. Brill, 1993), 872.
[14] 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām and Muḥammad Ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Isḥāq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford University Press, 1998), 162.
[15] Ibid., 255.
[16] The Qur'an does not assert, however, that the prophets should know the unseen independently of divine revelation. See Q. 6: 50; 7: 188.
[17] Q. 3: 44.

'the kings of Persia'. The consequence of this claim is that one can bring verses rather similar to those of the Qur'an, and the Qur'an is well aware of this consequence: 'Whenever Our Revelation is recited to them they say, "We have heard all this before—we could say something like this if we wanted—this is nothing but ancient fables."'[18]

3.2.2 Zakariyya' al-Razi

Al-Nadr b. al-Harith was later reportedly executed on Muhammad's order probably because of al-Harith's persistent denial of revelation, and his outspoken effort to disprove it.[19] Around two centuries later, however, a figure pursued fearlessly and clearly this line of thought, although in a theoretical way: Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya' al-Razi (ca. 250/854-313/925 or 323/935), known to the Latins as Rhazes, physician, philosopher, and alchemist.[20]

Al-Razi firmly holds that by the aid of natural reason, which according to him is God's greatest blessing to humanity, human beings could attain and achieve every advantage required for salvation. Human beings could also learn by themselves moral codes and necessary skills (such as shipbuilding skill and medicine), as well as solving the 'complicated issues' (*al-umur al-ghamida*) such as issues regarding cosmology, and even 'knowledge of God' (*ma'rifa al-bari'*). According to al-Razi, to make reason subordinate to anything else is to belittle it:

> [I]t behoves us not to bring it down from its high rank or in any way to degrade it, neither to make it the governed seeing that it is the governor, or the controlled seeing that it is the controller, or the subject seeing that it is the sovereign; rather must we consult it in all matters, respecting it and relying upon it always, conducting our affairs as it dictates and bringing them to a stop when it so commands.[21]

It is no surprise, then, that such an explicit and uncompromising rationalism, which is sometimes rather pejoratively called 'extremist rationalism'[22] does not leave any room for revelation as an allegedly epistemic source, rival to unaided reason or even as a complement to it. This is because according to al-Razi's approach, which reminds us of the early modern deists,[23] 'every human's reason is sufficient for his guidance, *if used.*'[24]

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[18] Q. 8: 31.
[19] Al-Tabari, *The History of Al-Tabari Vol. 7: The Foundation of the Community*, trans. Michael V. McDonald (Albany: Suny, 1987), 65.
[20] L.E. Goodman, "Al-Razī, Abū Bakr Muḥammad B. Zakariyyā'," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second ed., vol. 8 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 474.
[21] Rhazes, *The Spiritual Physick of Rhazes*, trans. A. J. Arberry (London: John Murray, 1950), 21.
[22] See, for instance Ḥasan Yūsufīyān, *'Aql va vaḥy* [Reason and Revelation] (Tehran: Islamic Research Institute for Culture and Thought, 1383 [2004]), esp. Ch. 3.
[23] More on the relevance of his thought to deism below.
[24] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1820-72*, ed. Edward Emerson and Waldo Emerson Robes, vol. 3 (London: Constable, 1910), 389. Ralph Waldo Emerson (183-1882) was a philosophical essayist, poet and popular lecturer with a clearly deist philosophy. For his biography, works and ideas, see Joel Myerson, ed., *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Although the works that al-Razi wrote to apply his epistemology to the phenomenon of prophecy and revelation have been reportedly lost,[25] one can partially reconstruct al-Razi's position on this issue through a debate with his fellow citizen, Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. ca. 933), a Persian Isma'ili philosopher, theologian and missionary (*da'i*). The debate was recorded by Abu Hatim,[26] in his book *The Proofs of Prophecy* (*A'lam al-nubuwwa*) in a rather triumphalist and dismissing tone.

In *A'lam*, Abu Hatim repeatedly refers to al-Razi as 'heretic' (*mulhid*), since al-Razi, according to Abu Hatim, would defend the sufficiency of the unaided reason. Al-Razi, as quoted by Abu Hatim, argues:

> It would have been more worthy of the wisdom of the Wise One—more worthy also of the mercy of the Merciful—for Him to have inspired all His creatures with the knowledge of what is to their benefit as well as to their harm in this world and the next. He would not have privileged some over others; and there would be no cause for quarrel and no dispute among them, leading to their destruction.[27]

Al-Razi regards the phenomenon of prophecy, *per se*, to be not only futile but also destructive, a phenomenon that, he thinks, is consequently to be severely criticized, and dismissed altogether.[28]

Al-Razi reportedly further argues, in a sometimes offensive tone, that religions systematically preclude their adherents from 'rational investigation of religious principles and were very strict in this regard'.[29] He then quotes some famous prophetic *ahadith*, such as 'Beware of profound reflection, for those who came before you perished through profound reflection', to substantiate his position. Al-Razi concludes that believers act rather out of habitude and imitation which is totally unacceptable for him.

Al-Razi carries on his rejection of prophecy and revelation by pointing to, what he considers to be, the contradictory speeches of the prophets:

> Jesus claimed he was the son of God; Moses claimed that God had no son; Muḥammad claimed he [i.e., Jesus] was a creature, like all other humans; Mani and Zoroaster disagreed with Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad concerning the Eternal One, the creation of the world, and the origin of good and evil. Mani disagreed with Zoroaster regarding the two worlds and their causes. Muhammad claimed that Jesus was not crucified. The Jews and Christians deny this and claim that he was killed and crucified.[30]

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[25] A. J. Arberry, "Introduction," in *The Spiritual Physick of Rhazes*, trans. A. J. Arberry (London: John Murray, 1950), 9.
[26] To avoid unnecessary confusion between two Razis, from now on I shall refer to Abu Hatim al-Razi as Abu Hatim and to Zakariyya' al-Razi as al-Razi.
[27] Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *The Proofs of Prophecy*, trans. Tarif Khalidi (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2011), 1.
[28] It is worth mentioning that the Qur'an endorses that God 'inspired it [the soul to know] its own rebellion and piety!' (91: 8). But the difference between the Qur'anic position and that of al-Razi in this regard is that while for al-Razi the internal inspiration is *sufficient* for human's guidance, and consequently external guidance is redundant if not dangerous, the Qur'an firmly announces that in order for people to be guided they *also* need prophets and scriptures to bear for them 'good news and warning' (2: 119), in such a way that 'anyone who does not believe in […] God's messengers […] has gone far, far astray (4: 136). Al-Razi's position as reported, therefore, leaves no room for any compromise between his position and that of the Qur'an.
[29] Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *The Proofs of Prophecy*, 24.
[30] Ibid., 50.

Al-Razi concludes that if these religions had divine roots, they would have been be consistent with one another and hence true, but they contradict one another, thus they are not true and consequently not divine.

Al-Razi, then, goes on to tackle the issue of prophetic miracles. In a way that, one might say, anticipates David Hume's arguments against miracles,[31] he posits that miracles attributed to Muhammad were narrated by few people and 'could have been the result of collusion.'[32] Then he argues that those who made no claim of prophethood, such as jugglers, performed accomplishments similar to those who claimed to be prophet. More specifically, in a response to the challenge presented by Abu Hatim against al-Razi—but posed originally by the Qur'an itself, to the effect that 'let them produce one like it [the Qur'an], if what they say is true'[33]—al-Razi re-joins

> We would be obliged to adduce a thousand examples like it from the speech of men of eloquence and high style, prose rhymers, and poets. All of these examples would be more fluent in phrasing, more concise in meaning, more eloquent in both substance and form, and more elegant as rhymed prose.[34]

Furthermore, Al-Razi argues that sciences are far more useful than 'prophetic' teachings:

> Tell us where your imams indicated the difference between poisons, on the one hand, and nutriments and the effect of drugs, on the other. Show us just one single page similar to what has been transmitted from Hippocrates and Galen, from whom were transmitted not tens, but thousands of such pages. All of these were of benefit to people.[35]

In a response to Abu Hatim, al-Razi denies that even the roots and principles of these sciences were taken from the 'learning' (*ta'lim*) of the prophets and Imams.

From all we know from al-Razi, therefore, we could reasonably conclude that there is no reason to show hesitancy, as Sara Stroumsa (b. 1950) has shown, to call al-Razi a deist. Deism, historically and in principle, involves belief in a single God, and the sufficiency of natural reason to know and obey God. It also involves the denial of divine interference in the form of revelation

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[31] Hume defines miracle as 'a violation of the laws of nature', and the witnesses of a few people cannot establish the occurrence of miracle so defined. He believes 'no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous.' David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 83.

[32] Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *The Proofs of Prophecy*, 139.

[33] Q. 52: 34.

[34] Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *The Proofs of Prophecy*, 167.

[35] Ibid., 206.

and miracle in the universe.[36] Based upon this, unlike Stroumsa's statement 'belief in the goodness of divine providence' seems not to be one of 'the central components of deism.'[37]

Before al-Razi, some other thinkers such as Abu al-'Abbas Iranshahri (fl. 2nd half 3rd/9th cent.), Abu 'Isa al-Warraq (d. 247/861-62), and Ibn al-Rawandi (d. 298/910?) had radically criticized the idea of prophecy and revelation with similar arguments.[38] Nevertheless, al-Razi, as far as his ideas in this regard have indirectly been received by us, is more elaborate than others in denying Islamic revelation, and showing 'the inconsistencies of the Qur'an.' That is why he was singled out to be discussed briefly here.

To sum up, al-Razi takes prophecy to be 'charlatanism', and prophets as the main cause of 'unnecessary conflicts and bloodsheds'. He also considers scriptures as books that are full of 'contradictions'. Moreover, for him, human reason is both necessary, and enough for flourishing and happiness in both spiritual and worldly affairs.

3.3 The Approval Theories of Revelation

3.3.1 Introduction

After sketching the denial theory of revelation, now in this section the different approval theories of revelation will be explained. This section is mainly divided into two sub-sections: the first sub-section addresses the early theological theories of revelation; while the second sub-section addresses the philosophical theories of revelation.

A group of philosophers, theologians, and exegetes from the early centuries of Islam up until now has made every effort to puzzle out the problems of revelation—explained in the introductory chapter of this research—through divergent theories of revelation. A selective exposition of these theories shall be presented in what follows.[39] Though selective, an effort has been made to single out those figures/groups whose theories of revelation, as far as our purpose in this research is concerned, represent the most important ones in the history of Muslim thought.

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[36] Allen W. Wood, "Deism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4 (Thomson Gale, 2005), 2251; Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 346–51.

[37] Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawandi, Abu Bakr al-Razi and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1999), 9.

[38] See Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam.*

[39] The term 'theory' has been used here rather loosely, as some of these views are not (as received to us) so elaborate that they can be properly called theory.

3.3.2 Some Early Mu'tazili Theological Theories of Revelation

3.3.2.1 Introduction

In this section the apophatic theory of Mu'tazilis will be articulated, which sheds a significant light on the way divine revelation has been understood in the history of Muslim thought. Whether, and to what extent human beings are in principle capable of knowing God theoretically (if at all), has been the matter of a heated debate in the history of theology and philosophy in the Semitic religions. Negative or apophatic theologians, such as Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BCE-c. 50 CE), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215), Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), and Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 – c. 1328) believe that God is beyond the reach of human knowledge. They hold that human language cannot be used at least in a literal way to describe God. In this way, religious language is taken to be 'non-cognitive',[40] or at least not literally cognitive. Negative theologians emphasize that finite human beings are not able to know God, and literally talk about God. Put another way, God's existence is taken to be unimaginable, incomprehensible, ineffable and irreducibly wholly other.[41]

The advocates of positive or affirmative (cataphatic) theology agree with this doctrine that God transcends all human forms and attributes. They are, however, of the opinion that every term referring to concepts such as *good*, *beauty*, *love*, and similar concepts in ordinary language can be literally or at least analogously taken up to describe God, such as 'God is good', and 'God is love.'[42] For them, consequently, the language of religion is positively cognitive. Generally speaking, the main distinction between these two theological approaches lies in their claim about the capability, or otherwise, of human cognitive faculties for knowing and describing God.

It seems reasonable to claim that the main, but not the sole, advocates of negative theology in the history of Muslim thought were Mu'tazilis. By drawing an analogy between self-knowledge, and knowledge of God, Dirar b. 'Amr (728-815) an important early Mu'tazili theologian, for example, defends negative theology. He says

> we know from ourselves that an outsider is never able to explore the hidden sides of our nature to the same extent that we are aware of them ourselves. This is why we must be satisfied with negative theology.'[43]

All attributes of God, according to this apophatic position, should be taken as talking of God only negatively. God's omniscience, for instance, in this tradition only means God is not ignorant. The

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[40] Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu, eds., "Negative Theology," *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Madlen/Oxford/Victoria: Blackwell, 2004), 466.
[41] D. Briane, "Negative Theology," ed. E. Craig, *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2005), 723.
[42] V. Kesich, "Via Negativa," ed. L. Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 14: 9587.
[43] J. Van Ess, "Dirar b. 'Amr," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 12: 226.

only status religious language has, hence, is a negative one. It cannot describe God literally, and in a positive manner.

Mu'tazilis believed that no doctrinal distinction is to be made between those Muslims believing in the eternity of the Qur'anic words, and Christians who believe that Jesus is eternal based on the doctrine that Jesus is the Word of God, and then arriving at this conclusion that Jesus is not created.[44] Most Mu'tazilis also believe that the Qur'an is created in 'the Preserved Tablet' (*lawh al-mahfuz*).[45] The Preserved Tablet itself, it is believed, is created before the creation of the world.

What then, is the relationship between the existent Qur'an (i.e. the available copies of the Qur'an), and the Qur'an in the Preserved Tablet? Some theologians (*mutakallimun*), such as Ibn Kullab (d. ca 240/854-55) believed that the Qur'an is eternal, and uncreated. They followed this position that the existent Qur'an is an expression (*'ibara*), and narration (*hikaya*) of the uncreated Qur'an, the implication of which would be that the meaning of the Qur'an is uncreated, but its wording is created.[46] However, those—either Baghdadi or Basri—Mu'tazilis who believed that the Qur'an is created, did not imply that it is humanly constructed. Rather, they believed that the Qur'an is created in the Preserved Tablet, before the creation of the world, and it is revealed to Muhammad from that place during the course of Muhammad's life.[47]

A significant disagreement, however, occurred among Mu'tazilis regarding the relationship between the existent Qur'an, and the pre-existent Qur'an which is taken to be preserved in the Preserved Tablet. Basri Mu'tazilis, it appears, believed that the pre-existent Qur'an is exactly transformed into, i.e. *inlibrated* in the earthly Qur'an,[48] whereas Baghdadi Mu'tazilis held that the existent Qur'an is not the inlibration of the pre-existent Qur'an in the Preserved Tablet but just its expression (*'ibara*), and imitation (*hikaya*).

Although the majority of Mu'tazilis held that God created the Qur'an in the Preserved Tablet, some of them rejected the very existence of the pre-existent Qur'an in the Preserved Tablet, or at least they did not rely their theory of revelation on that. Ibrahim al-Nazzam (c. 165–221/c. 782–836), a prominent Basri Mu'tazili theologian for example, is reported to have believed that revelation is created in the air at the time of revelation, not prior to it, in the form of sounds, though not in the form of a specific language. It is the recipient, including Muhammad in the case of Islam,

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[44] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 240–1.
[45] Daniel A. Madigan, "Preserved Tablet," ed. J. D. McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
[46] More on Ibn Kullab below.
[47] Wolfson, *The Philosopher of the Kalam*, 268.
[48] On the concept of inlibration see below, section 4.2.3.

who would choose the specific language by which the body of revelation is read and, as it were, decoded.

This implies that the existent Qur'an is not even a narration (*hikaya*) of the Word of God, rather it is something reshaped by the specific language chosen by the recipient of the Qur'an.[49] It is, by way of analogy, like waves received by a radio receiver, with the difference that that the receiver here, i.e. prophet, is not completely passive and has an agency to translate waves into an specific language, rather than any other languages.

3.3.2.2 Mu'ammar Ibn 'Abbad

As we have just seen, the prevalent Mu'tazili position was that the Qur'an is created by God in the Preserved Tablet before the creation of the world. Mu'ammar Ibn 'Abbad al-Sulami (d. 215/830), a leading Mu'tazili theologian from Basra, however, believed that the Word of God 'is only a capacity created by God in man enabling him to produce a word which expresses the will and design of God.'[50] For him, the Qur'an is not the direct work of God, but the direct work of nature. The Qur'an, he thought, is an accident, and God does not create accidents. God only created substances, whereas accidents are created by substances, rather than directly by God.[51]

The distinction between substances, created by God, and accidents, created by nature, is essential for Mu'ammar, since if substances and accidents were both created by God then there would remain no room for the free will of human beings.[52] Therefore, according to Mu'ammar, God only creates the entity (substance) of the Prophet Muhammad, while the Qur'an as an accident of Muhammad's entity, is created by Muhammad himself rather than directly by God. However, since God has created Muhammad, in order to communicate through him to humankind, Muhammad's words are, in a figurative sense, the Word of God.

Mu'ammar's theological position is radically and explicitly apophatic to the extent that he thinks nothing taken from the concrete and visible world is able to positively describe God. Attributes of God are to be taken, therefore, as essentially the way to show how our language falls inherently short of doing justice to talk of God. For example, when it is said that 'God is just', it

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[49] Wolfson, *The Philosopher of the Kalam*, 275.

[50] Ibid., 277.

[51] H. Daiber, "Mu'ammar b. 'Abbad," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (London: Brill, 1993), 7: 259. See also Anwar G. Chejne, "Mu'ammar Ibn 'Abbad Al-Sulami, a Leading Mu'tazilite of the Eighth-Ninth Centuries," *The Muslim World* 51, no. 4 (1961): 314–15.

[52] 'Substance' and 'accident' are two philosophical key concepts in Muslim philosophy and theology that have been taken originally from Aristotle's metaphysics. Substance, or more precisely primary substance is 'ontologically basic entity' without which nothing independently exists, and it is 'not in a subject' but is itself a subject. The example would be an individual human. The thing which is not an 'ontologically basic entity' is an accident. An accident, in order to exist, is dependent on a subject. An example would be a human's colour. See S. Marc Cohen, "Substances," in *A Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Georgios Anagnostopoulos (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 197–99.

only means that 'God is not unjust'. The language in no way can capture and put into words God's justice. His apophaticism seems, hence, well linked with his ontology, if God is only the creator of substances and not accidents, then nothing concrete and visible in the world, which is the feature of accidents, has any direct bearing on God.

Mu'ammar goes so far as to claim that even the divine attribute of 'eternal' (*qadim*) cannot be properly attributed to God. 'Eternal' is a 'relational name' (*ism al-idafa*) and since God is taken to be eternal only compared with the perishable things, and God is incomparable to anything, then even the attribution of 'qadim' to God would limit God's infinity.[53]

In a nutshell, for Mu'ammar, the Qur'an is neither directly created by God nor uncreated. Rather, Muhammad as God's prophet directly created it. The Qur'an is speech, and speech is accident, and accidents are created by substances, and God only created substances. In this way Mu'ammar seems to be different from other Mu'tazilis, one of whom is discussed below, who take the Qur'an as God's speech, and to be God's creation.

3.3.2.3 Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar

Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (c. 325-415/c. 937-1025), from Asadabad, a town to the southwest of Hamadan, Iran, was one of the last great thinkers of the Mu'tazili school.[54] In the seventh part of his *summa theologica*, called *al-Muqni fi abwab al-tawhid wa al-'adl* (Compendium on the Principles of [Divine] Unity and Justice) he extensively talks on the nature of speech in general, and specifically the nature of 'God's speech' (*kalam Allah*). He argues that the attribute of 'speaking' (*mutakallim*) can be attributed to God because, as he puts it in the title of one chapter of the seventh part of the *Muqni*, 'God produces speech (*fa'ala al-kalam*) by virtue of which He becomes speaking.'[55] God's speech, according to him, is an instance of God's acts, and God's acts are in relation to the world. God's speech is, therefore, from the same genus or kind (*jins*) of human speech: it is 'audible spoken speech', and consequently falls under the category of accident sound; in this way God's speech becomes understandable for human beings. God's speech, therefore, is not eternal. It is directed at people, and issued for their benefit, and therefore, it is temporal.[56]

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[53] Hans Daiber, *Das theologisch-philosophische System des Mu'ammar Ibn 'Abbad as-Sulami* (Beirut: Orient-Instutute der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft, 1975), 590.
[54] Muammer Iskenderoglu, "'Abd al-Jabbar Qadi," in *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Islamic Philosophy,* ed. Oliver Leaman, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1.
[55] Abu al-Hasan 'Abd al-Jabbar, *al-Muqni fi Abwab al-Tawhid wa al-'Adl (Compendium on the Principles of [Divine] Unity and Justice)*, ed. Ibrahim al-Ibyari, vol. 7 (Cairo, 1961), 59.
[56] J. R. T. M. Peters, *God's Created Speech: a Study in the Speculative Theology of the Muʿtazili Qadi l-Qudat abu l-Hasan ʿAbd al-Jabbar bn Ahmad al-Hamadani* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 313–31.

The difference between ʻAbd al-Jabbar and Muʻammar in their theories of revelation, as far as I can see, seems to be that, whilst for Muʻammar, God has no attribute, but probably only the attribute of leading (*hidaya*);[57] for ʻAbd al-Jabbar, God has the attribute of speech, though God's speech is not eternal.

3.3.3 Some Early Non-Muʻtazili Theological Theories of Revelation

3.3.3.1 Bishr al-Marisi

After Muʻammar's theory of revelation, perhaps among the approval theories of revelation, the most radical theory at one end of the spectrum, is a theory that does not belong to Muʻtazilis, but to a Jahmi Hanafi theologian, called Bishr al-Marisi (d. ca. 218/833), the contemporary of al-Shafiʻi (150/767-204/820), and Ibn Hanbal (164/780-241/855). None of al-Marisi's books has survived, but his epistemological position as well as his theory of revelation can be at least partially reconstructed through some of the existing refutations (*al-rudud*) written against him.

Al-Marisi is depicted in these refutations as a 'radical' rationalist who thinks 'philosophical speculation' (*al-nazar*) and 'deductive analogy' (*al-qiyas*) ought to be prioritized over the Qur'an and Sunna. In a debate regarding the creation of the Qur'an with ʻAbd al-ʻAziz al-Kinani (d. 240/855) a jurist and disciple of al-Shafiʻi, in the presence of the ʻAbbasid caliphate al-Ma'mun in Baghdad, Bishr was reported by al-Kinani as saying, while addressing the caliphate:

> O the commander of believers! I have a lot of things to say in the debate with him [al-Kinani], but he says we have to argue from the text of the Qur'an (*nass al-tanzil*) while I say we have to argue from *al-nazar* and *al-qiyas*, so he has to abandon asking me to argue from the text of the Qur'an and instead he has to debate with me based upon something different.[58]

Al-Marisi is not unique in giving priority to the speculation and deduction over the Qur'an and the Sunna in the fundamental theological matters, as Muʻtazilis, and even some Ashʻaris such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (544/1150-606/1210) took, at least theoretically, and to a certain extent practically, the same approach.[59] However, the way al-Marisi reportedly made use of speculation and deduction in theological matters seems rather unique.

Al-Marisi believes apophatically that the names attributed to God in the Qur'an, such as 'the compassionate' (*rahim*), and 'the omniscient' (*ʻalim*), are *mustaʻar* (lit. borrowed) and they are

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[57] Daiber, *Das theologisch-philosophische System des Mu'ammar Ibn 'Abbad as-Sulami*, 590.

[58] ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz al-Kinānī, *Al-ḫayda wa al-iʻtiẓhār fī al-rad ʻalā man qāla bi khalq al-Qur'ān [Impartiality and Apology in Refutation of the One Who Said the Qur'ān Is Created],"* ed. ʻAlī Al-Faqīhī (Medina: Maktabat al-ʻUlūm wa al-Ḥukm, 2001), 81.

[59] More on Fakhr al-Din al-Razi below, section 3.3.4.

used only in order to name the unknowable and nameless God. They are, therefore, metaphorical and figurative names coined by humans, and not by God, to describe God. As one of his contemporary critics puts it,

> Al-Marisi's approach to the Qur'an was the same as his approach to the God's names. For him the Qur'an was created by human speech, in his opinion God did not speak through even a letter of it, God's names, according to him, are also human construction.[60]

Therefore, al-Marisi believes that the Qur'an is not the speech of God but 'only human speech about God'.[61] Moreover, if the content of the Qur'an is interpreted literally, it is the wrong human speech about God.

3.3.3.2 Ibn Kullab

Ibn Kullab (d. ca. 241/855), again a non-Mu'tazili theologian from Basra who had a great influence on the development of Ash'ari thought,[62] tried to reconcile both the created and uncreated positions regarding the nature of the Qur'anic revelation. Ibn Kullab does this by making a distinction between the speech of God (*kalam Allah*), which is eternal, and therefore uncreated, and its realization, which would not be possible without an addressee, and hence it is created.[63] As such, the Qur'an is an 'expression' (*'ibara*) of God's speech, and not God's speech *per se*.

He consequently distinguishes between the 'recitation' (*qira'a*) which is made of words, and 'the thing recited' (*maqru'*) which is God's eternal speech, and beyond words, while the existing Qur'an is its expression.[64] Accordingly, as far as *qira'a* is concerned the Qur'an is created, but as far as *maqru'* is concerned, it is uncreated. He was therefore consistently of the opinion that the 'Qur'anic imperative' (*amr*), the 'narration' (*khabar*), and the 'prohibition' (*nahy*), do not belong to the speech of God per se, because 'God creates nothing but told it 'Be' and his saying 'Be' is impossible to be created.'[65]

3.3.3.3 Ibn Hanbal

The most radical theory of revelation at another end of the spectrum of approval theories of

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[60] 'Uthmān Al-Dārimī, *Rad al-Dārimī 'alā al-Marīsī al-'anīd [Al-Dārimī's Refutation of the Opinionated al-Marīsī],"* ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid Al-Faqī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1358), 10.
[61] Josef van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration? Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology," in *The Qur'an as Text* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 181.
[62] W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 288.
[63] Josef van Ess, "Ibn Kullāb," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second ed., vol. 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 391.
[64] Van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration?," 182ff.
[65] Abū al-Ḥasan Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt Al-Islamiyyin [The Theological Opinions of the Muslims]*, vol. 2, ed. M. M. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1950), 233.

revelation belongs to Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Hanbal Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shaybani (164/780-241/855), better known as Ibn Hanbal. Unlike the radical position of Bishr al-Marisi and the middle position of Ibn Kullab, and some Ash'aris (such as Fakhr al-Razi), Ibn Hanbal, and Hanbalis believed that

> what is between the covers is the word of God, and what we read and write is the very word of God. Therefore, the words and letters are themselves the speech of God. Since the speech of God is uncreated the words must be eternal, uncreated.[66]

Ibn Hanbal, therefore, believes in what Harry Wolfson (1887-1974), the prominent Russian historian of the Semitic religions, called 'inlibration',[67] i.e. the God's eternal Word has literally become book, or, to put it simply, the incarnation of the Word. This implies that whereas in Christianity God has become human through 'incarnation', which is the enfleshment of God, in Hanbalism and arguably later on in the prevalent understanding of the Qur'anic revelation among almost all Muslims, the Word of God has become book through 'inlibration', which is the embookment or bookification or inscripturation of God.[68]

Ibn Hanbal's position in this regard becomes clear when he refutes the createdness of the Qur'an held by the theologian Jahm ibn Safwan (d. 128/745). Ibn Hanbal reports that Jahm, while arguing for the createdness of the Qur'an, presents a dilemma that either the Qur'an is God, or rather other than God (*ghayr Allah*). If it is God, then this leads us to unbelief (*kufr*), but if it is other than God, then it is created because everything other than God is created. Ibn Hanbal's response is based on the—widely taken to be fallacious—tactic of not succumbing to either of dilemma's horns, and of only repeating his own position. He asserts that God does not describe the Qur'an as being God or other than God, rather God states that the Qur'an is God's Word and thus we describe the Qur'an as God's word and nothing else, otherwise we will be led astray.[69]

Although Ibn Hanbal believes that the 'letters' (*alfaz*) of the existent Qur'an are 'eternal' (*qadim*) and 'uncreated' (*ghayr makhluq*), i.e. co-eternal with the divine essence, there remains the question of whether or not the people's 'pronunciation' (*talaffuz*), and the 'recitation' of the Qur'an are also uncreated. Contradictory positions as to this issue have been attributed to Ibn Hanbal. Ibn Hanbal was sometimes taken to be of the opinion that 'the Koran itself was not created, but the Lafz al-Koran, by which he understood the human acts of writing, reading, reciting, and all other

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[66] Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, *The Summa Philosophiae of al-Shahrastani, Nihāyat Al-aqdām Fi 'ilm Al-kalām*, trans. and ed. Alfred Guillaume (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 104.
[67] Literally, 'embookment' from Latin *in libro* meaning 'in book'.
[68] Wolfson, *The Philosopher of the Kalam*, 252.
[69] Ibn Hanbal, *Al-Radd 'ala al-Jahmiyyah wa al-Zanadiqa [A Refutation of Jahmis and Zanadiqa]*, ed. Sabri Salama Shahin (Riyadh: Dar al-Sabat, 2002), 105–6.

acts connected with the use or preservation of the revelation, was created.'[70]

He was even reported as refraining from passing any judgment as to this issue, condemning any judgment, including the judgment that the pronunciation of the Qur'an is uncreated, as 'heretical innovation' (*bid'a*).[71] Nonetheless, Ibn Hanbal was also reported as holding the pronunciation of the Qur'an as uncreated.[72] However, Ibn Hanbal's position seems to be closer to 'not asking how in difficult theological matters' (*bi-la kayf*). This is a position that, beyond reasonable doubt, is Ibn Hanbal's position in other difficult theological matters. Whatever his position might be, later Hanbalis such as Ibn Taymiyya (661/1263-728/1328), took meaning, letter and pronunciation of the Qur'an altogether as uncreated.[73]

3.3.3.4 Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari

Like Ibn Hanbal, divergent positions concerning the nature of the Qur'anic revelation have been attributed to Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (260/873-4 -300/912-3). For example, in his book *al-Ibana* he himself declares that he follows Ibn Hanbal in religious issues.[74] He then offers some 'proofs' for the uncreatedness of the Qur'an without making any difference between the word of the Qur'an and its pronunciation.[75] He then sympathetically quotes Ibn Hanbal as saying: 'In my creed and madhab there is no doubt that the Qur'an is uncreated.'[76]

However, Ibn Hazm (384/994- 456/1064) an Andalusian Zahiri jurist and theologian takes the position of the Ash'aris to be different from that of what he calls *ahl al-sunna*, those whom he considers to be the 'orthodox' Islam who follow Ibn Hanbal's theory of the Qur'anic revelation. While, according to Ibn Hazm, both ahl al-sunna and Ash'aris regard God's word as eternal and uncreated, they differ on whether the word of God is 'other than God' (*ghayr Allah*) or inseparable from Him. Since for Ash'aris the Word of God is single and inseparable from Him, what we have in the existent Qur'an as revelation is not the Word of God *per se*, but its 'expression' (*'ibara*).[77]

Whatever the position of al-Ash'ari himself might be, it seems the case that Ash'aris take the words of the Qur'an, let alone its pronunciation, to be created. For example, Fakhr al-Din al-

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[70] Walter Melville Patton, *Aḥmed Ibn Ḥanbal and the Miḥna: A Biography of the Imām Including an Account of the Moḥammedan Inquisition Called the Miḥna, 218-234 A.H.* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1897), 34–35. See also: Wolfson, *The Philosopher of the Kalam*, 251–52.

[71] Ibid., 36.

[72] H Laoust, "Aḥmad B. Ḥanbal," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 275.

[73] Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-'aqīda al-Wāsiṭiyya*, ed. 'Alawī Al-Saqqāf (Dhahran: Al-durar al-saniyya, 1433), 115–16.

[74] 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, *Al-Ibānah 'an Uṣūl al-diyānah (The Elucidation of Islām's Foundation)*, trans. Walter Conrad Klein (New York: Kraus, 1967), 31.

[75] Ibid., 66–68.

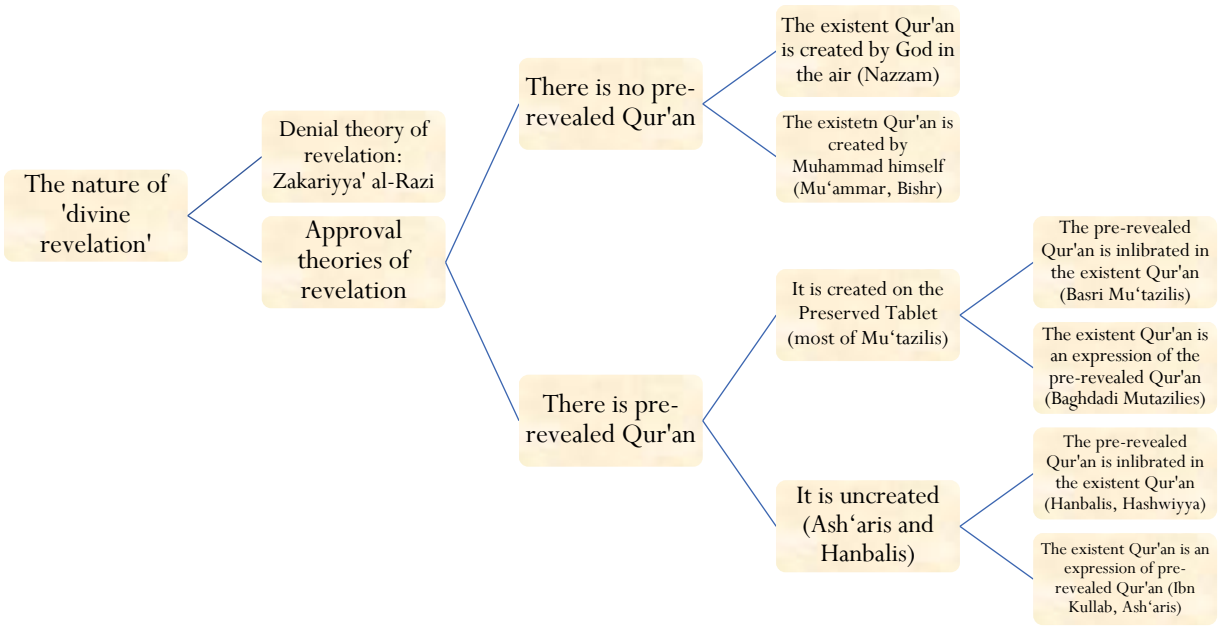
[76] Ibid., 75.

[77] Abū Muḥammad Ibn Ḥazm, *Al-Faṣl Fī Al-Milal Wa-Al-Ahwā' Wa-Al-Nihal [Chapter on Religions, Heresies, and Sects]*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣr and 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Umayra, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Jayl, 1996), 11 & 13.

Razi (543/1149-606/1209), an Ash'ari theologian, states: 'it is intellectually evident that speech which is composed of letters and sounds is impossible to be eternal.'[78] Then he goes on to provide a critique of 'rational' (*'aqli*), and 'scriptural' (*naqli*) reasons presented for the doctrine of uncreatedness of the Qur'an. He concludes that when it is said that the words of the Qur'an are the speech of God they are only metaphorically so.[79]

Before going any further in our discussion, let me draw the taxonomy of the early theories of revelation so far sketched out as follows:

Figure/chart (3): Some Early Theological Theories of Muslim Revelation



3.3.4 Some Philosophical Theories of Revelation

3.3.4.1 Al-Farabi

The approval theories of revelation thus far sketched out were all, more or less, theological than philosophical. Abu Nasr al-Farabi (c. 260/c.870-c. 339/c.950), a Persian or Turkic neoplatonic philosopher,[80] however is one of the first Muslim philosophers who elaborated a philosophically nuanced, and innovative approval theory of Muslim revelation. Al-Farabi is so prominent in the

[78] Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi, *Tafsir al-Fakhr al-Razi* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1981), 1: 38.
[79] Ibid., 39.
[80] 'Neo-Platonism' is a modern term which became prevalent from the nineteenth-century onward. The term is rooted in German scholarship. It denotes, however, a school of philosophy committed to philosophical teachings of Plato (427—347 B.C.E.), but it is distinct to a significant extent from Plato and Platonism. It is founded by Plotinus (204—270 C.E.). See Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Berkeley: Acumen, 2008).

history of Muslim philosophy that he is famously called 'the second master' (*al-mu'allim al-thani*), the first master being Aristotle.[81] Henry Corbin (1903-1978), a French philosopher and Islamologist, describes al-Farabi's theory of prophecy as 'the crowning glory of his work'.[82]

Al-Farabi takes God as a remote first principle whose effect on humans is exclusively performed through intermediary celestial intellects emanating from God (ten intellects, to be precise). He uses the theory of intellect to explain, *inter alia*, prophecy. For al-Farabi, a prophet is the one whose mind is distinguished from other humans by being fully actualized through the 'Active Intellect' (*al-'aql al-fa"al*), which is the tenth and the last intellect in the chain of celestial intellects. Moreover, the prophet is the one who is ready and determined to share with others the knowledge he acquired for happiness. Consequently, revelation is a 'state' (*hala*) in which there remains no mediation between human intellect, and the Active Intellect'.[83]

Although the Active Intellect is the lowest in the ranking of celestial intellects, it is cosmologically and epistemologically the most interesting one since this intellect is responsible, *inter alia*, for human affairs below the heavens. In al-Farabi's view, the important point about the kind of unique relationship between a prophet and a philosopher with regard to the Active Intellect is that their relationship to it seems not to be in the form of *unio mysica* or 'unitive fusion' (*ittihad*), but in the form of 'contact or conjunction without identification' (*ittisal*).[84] In this way the inherent ontological distance between human intellect, even in its perfect form, and the Active Intellect, let alone God, is preserved.

According to Al-Farabi, a prophet is not intellectually superior to a philosopher or sage. As far as the full actualization of their mind through contacting with the Active Intellect is concerned, prophet and philosopher are actually the same—if we do not say that a philosopher is superior to a prophet, since the former deals with the 'elite' (*khassa*), i.e. those who use 'demonstrative reasons' (*barahin yaqiniyya*) while the latter deals with the 'common people' ('*amma*), i.e. those who use 'imagination'.[85] Both philosopher and prophet have attained the most supreme state of human perfection one could reach, a state to which al-Farabi refers as 'the acquired intellect' (*al-'aql al-mustafad*) that is necessary for 'human flourishing' or 'eudaemonia' (*sa'ada*). The difference between

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[81] For a short, creative and witty introduction to al-Farabi's philosophy, see Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy without Any Gaps, Volume 3*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), Chs. 9 & 10.

[82] Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (London: Routledge, 2006), 162.

[83] Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, *Al-Farabi fi Hududi-hi wa Rusimi-hi (al-Farabi's Definitions and Descriptions)*, ed. Jafar al-Yasin (Beirut: 'Alam al-Kutub, 1985), 646.

[84] *Ittihad* is implicitly rejected by him as follows: 'His soul [the soul of perfect man] is united *as it were* with the Active Intellect', (bracket and emphasis added), Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State (Mabadi' Ara' Ahl Al-Madinat Al-Fadilah)*, trans. Richard Walzer (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1997), Chapter 15 § 10, pp. 244–5, for a commentary on this sentence, especially the significance of 'as it were' in it, see pp. 409-10.

[85] Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, *Tahsil al-Sa'ada [Attainment of Happiness]*, ed. 'Ali Abu Melehem (Beirut: Al-Hilal, 1995), 83–5.

philosopher and prophet, however, lies in how one can attain the connection with the Active Intellect, whether it is through 'speculative meditation', or through 'imagination', or 'representation' (*mutakhayyila*).[86] The former is the way of philosopher while the latter is the way of prophet.

Due to the significance of imaginative faculty in al-Farabi's theory of prophecy, it is worth discussing it at some length.[87] Imagination, as a faculty of the soul, is located in the heart just below the rational faculty serving it. Its function is to store 'sense perceptions' (*mahsusat*) when the objects of perception are present, or to store the 'impressions of sense perceptions' when the objects are no longer present.[88] Moreover, and more importantly for our discussion, it can also create 'figurative images' (*muhakat*), i.e. images that are not representations of the objects of perception but symbolize a given object.[89]

Generally speaking, imagination deals with the particulars related to the present or future events, while human intellect deals with the abstract incorporeal intelligent beings. When imaginative faculty receives metaphysical truths it, inevitably, recasts them in figurative images. It is because this faculty is a physical faculty and consequently cannot receive metaphysical truths in their abstract and pure forms.[90] For example, the anthropomorphic depiction of God is the figurative recasting of God who is essentially beyond any form. In this way, prophecy becomes auxiliary to the rational faculty, and a vital element in the human perfection. In this way the primacy of reason and philosophy is maintained, and prophecy and revelation are confined to the imaginative faculty.[91] Prophecy, however, is taken to be the perfect level of imaginative faculty.[92]

What is probably the most significant point in al-Farabi's theory of prophecy and revelation is that for him prophecy is not associated with, as it were, being possessed by supernatural powers, rather it is related to the inner faculty of the soul itself.[93] He thinks the soul should reach a level of perfection to be able to receive revelation. This has led some scholars to think of his theory as a naturalistic theory, which understands prophecy as 'an imaginative 'imitation' or translation of scientific or philosophical truths'.[94]

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[86] Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 164.

[87] One might, therefore, wonder why Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), when briefly discussing al-Farabi's theory of prophecy, has not brought up the subject of imaginative faculty. See Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (London: George Allen, 1958), 11–14.

[88] That is why *mutakhayilla* is sometimes rendered as 'representation'. Since its function is much more general than representation, 'imagination' seems a better rendering.

[89] Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, *Kitab Ara' Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila [The Book of the Opinions of People of the Vittous City]*, ed. Albir Nasri Nadir (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1968), 108ff.

[90] Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 58–60.

[91] R. Walzer, "Al-Farabi's Theory of Prophecy and Divination," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77, no. 01 (November 1957): 142.

[92] Al-Farabi, *Kitab Ara' Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila [The Book of the Opinions of People of the Vittous City]*, 115.

[93] Walzer, "Al-Farabi's Theory of Prophecy and Divination," 142.

[94] David Shatz, "Prophecy," ed. Edward Craig, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 7: 767.

3.3.4.2 Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani

Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani (fl. second-third quarters of the 4th/10th Century), a contemporary of al-Farabi, from Persia, was one of the most important early Isma'ili[95] missionaries (*da'i*) and philosophers. He was active in the Isma'ili mission (*da'wa*) in Sistan and Khurasan and wrote numerous treatises on Isma'ili philosophy. Little is known about his biography, and that is why both his date of birth and death are not specifically known. It is said that he was killed by the governor (*amir*) of Sijistan (Sistan), although again it is also a matter of debate by specifically which governor, and why exactly.[96]

To get a grasp of al-Sijistani's theory of prophecy and revelation we have to lay out his Neo-Platonic epistemology and ontology. Al-Sijistani tries to go beyond both anthropomorphism (*tashbih*) on the one hand, and divesting God of the attributes of God (*ta'til*) on the other. His strategy is to do away with both *tashbih* and *ta'til*, and to appeal to 'double negation', a kind of *via negativa duplex*.[97] For him, God is the absolute, and without any qualification, God is not the substance (*jawhar*), God even has no being, rather God is beyond both being and nothingness:

> the Originator [*al-mubdi'*, i.e. God] is not "Himself" as would be the case with the identity [*huwiyya*][98] of existential beings, nor is He "not-Himself" as would be the case with the nonidentity of nonexistential beings, but "rather His identity is simply the manifestation of the negating of the Originator, exalted is He, of both identities and nonidentities (brackets added).[99]

God is not the cause (*'illa*) of the world, since for al-Sijistani God is not a thing (*shay'*) and therefor 'thingness' (*shay'iyya*) cannot be attributed to God. God is not in place, God is not describable, classifiable and knowable, nor is He/She/It limited. But taking this rather usual and

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95 The Isma'iliyya (Isma'ilism) is a distinct branch of Shi'i Islam. The Isma'ilis are currently the second largest Shi'i community after the Twelvers (*Ithna'ashariyya*) Shi'is. Unlike the majority Sunni branch of Islam, all Shi'is share this doctrine that only the family of prophet Muhammad (*ahl al-bayt*), and certain descendants of the prophet's family uphold the right to the spiritual and political guardianship of Muslim community after the death of prophet. They, however, are divided further into some branches originally due to the disagreement over who was to be spiritual and political leader (*Imam*) of the Muslim community from amongst the various descendants of the prophet's family. Isma'ili Shi'i Islam dates back to the middle of the 2nd/8th Century, and more specifically to the aftermath of the death of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (83?/702?-148/765) when a group of followers of Imam al-Sadiq opted for the guardianship (*imamate*) of Isma'il b. Ja'far al-Sadiq (the elder son of Imam al-Sadiq), and they believed that *imamate* was to be continued in Isma'il's progeny (hence the title of Isma'iliyya for this group), while some other Shi'is recognized Musa al-Kazim (128/745-183/799), the younger brother of Isma'il, as the next Imam in the chain of Shi'i *imamate*. On Isma'ili thought and history, see Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

96 Paul E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Isma'ili Neoplatonism of Abu Ya'qub Al-Sijistani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 17–18.

97 Paul E. Walker, "The Isma'ilis," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 82.

98 To add the original terms between the brackets to the English translation, I consulted the 'Arabic edition of *al-Yanabi'*: Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, *Kitab al-Yanabi' [The Book of Wellsprings]*, ed. Mustafa Qalib (Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Tijari, 1965).

99 Paul Ernest Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom: A Study of Abu Yaqub Al-Sijistani's Kitab al-Yanabi, Including a Complete English Translation With Commentary and Notes* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 49–50.

typical apophatic step is not enough for al-Sijistani, because God is not depicted enough as the transcendent if only corporeal attributes are divested of God. Al-Sijistani goes one level up denying even the denial of assigning these attributes to God: 'God—exalted His greatness—is neither in place nor not in place."[100] The negation of negation is, consequently, a way to make God unintelligible altogether. In this way God is beyond human logic.[101]

But how is the universe created when God is not even the cause of the universe? Al-Sijistani is very sensitive to the charge of *ta'til* (God's being devoid of any attributes). While he was accused of endorsing ta'til he vehemently and frequently dismisses it. In this vein, he depicts a number of God's agencies that are responsible for fulfilling the functions otherwise attributed to God Him/Her/Itself. From God's 'Command' (*al-amr*) or 'will', it is 'intellect' (*al-'aql*) that is 'originated' (*abda'a*). God originates through his Command the intellect *ex nihilo*, i.e., out of nothing (*la min shay'*). Al-Sijistani puts emphasis on God's *Command* as the originator of the intellect and thereby denies that God is directly the necessary cause, or the maker of the world, or a thing (*shay'*). God is not cause, al-Sijistani argues, because an 'effect' (*ma'lul*) must share a quality with its cause otherwise the latter would not be able to be the cause of the former.[102]

The intellect is the 'first originated being' (*al-mubdi' al-awwal*), and it bears the attributes usually ascribed to God, it is 'an intellectual similitude of Him'.[103] The intellect is complete and timeless. In this way al-Sijistani tries to find a way to preserve the attributes usually ascribed to God, without compromising God's unqualified transcendence. It is, therefore, the intellect and other God's surrogates (to be explained below) that are the proper subject of al-Sijistani's theology, and it is not God directly which is the proper subject of theology, since God is already rendered radically beyond any comprehension whatsoever.

From the intellect there comes yet another celestial being called the 'soul' (*al-nafs*), the soul comes from the intellect through 'gushing' or 'emanation' (*inbijas*) rather than 'origination' (*ibda'*). The difference between 'gushing' and 'origination' is that the former is emanation out of something

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[100] Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, *Kitab al-Iftikhar [Book of Boast]*, ed. Ismail K. Poonawala (Beirut: Dar al-Qarb al-Islami, 2000), 84. See also his remarks in his *Kitab Sullam al-Najat* (Book of the Ladder of Salvation) published in: Mohamed Alibhai, "Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani and 'Kitab Sullam al-Najat': A Study in Islamic Neoplatonism" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1983), 9-11 ('Arabic text).

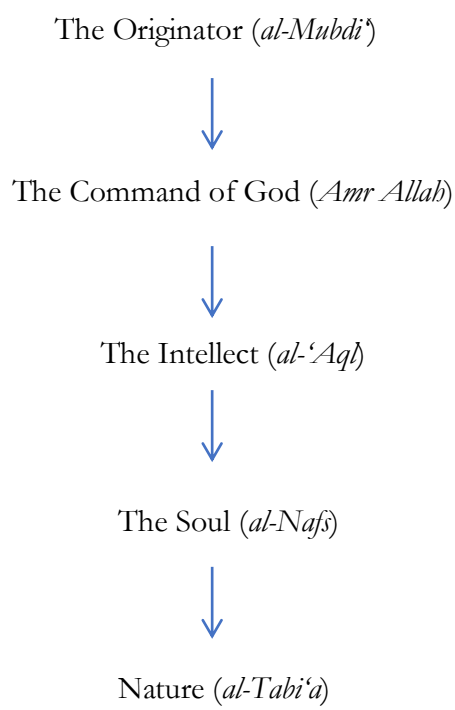
[101] Since according to the 'law of the excluded middle' in the classical logic, either a proposition or its negation is true ($A \vee \neg A$), therefore the double negation of a proposition ($\neg\neg A$) is equivalent to the original proposition A ($\neg\neg A = A$). But al-Sijistani is not willing to apply this logical law here. So, for example, from this double negative proposition that 'God is *not* not in place' he is not willing to draw this logical conclusion that 'God is in place'. What he intends to show is that God is so beyond the comprehension, that logic is not applicable to the description of the way God truly is. Here is a textual evidence corroborating this judgment: 'God is transcendent of […] the boundaries of logic (*hudud al-mantiq*)', Abu Ya'qub Al-Sijistani, *Kitab al-Maqalid al-Malakutiyya [The Book of the Keys to the Kingdom]*, ed. Ismail K. Poonawala (Tunis: Dar al-Qarb al-Islami, 2011), 43.

[102] *Cf.* e.g. Al-Sijistani, *Kitab al-Iftikhar [Book of Boast]*, 100–1. See also Paul E. Walker, *Abu Ya'qub Al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 96.

[103] Walker, *Abu Ya'qub Al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary*, 88.

that exists before (*al-inbi'ath min shay'*), whilst the latter is origination out of nothing (*al-ibda' la min shay'*).[104] While al-Farabi portrays the *ten* intellects, al-Sijistani's ontology contains only one intellect. This is Intellect and not God, then, that is 'cause of causes' (*'illat al-'ilal*).[105] God is so transcendent, in al-Sijistani's thought, that He/She/It is not even the cause of causes of the cosmos; it is God's deputy, intellect, that performs this role.

Figure/chart (4): The main parts of al-Sijistani's cosmology[106]



Unlike the Intellect, the Soul is not perfect. The Intellect is timeless, therefore it is eternal, and in rest,[107] while the Soul is in motion, and restlessly so, then it creates time. The Soul, in turn, produces the nature (*al-tabi'a*) that is constitutive of matter and form, and is the lower form of the Soul. Human soul is a part of this universal soul. The Soul is, consequently, an intermediary between the realm of spiritual and material. The Soul has both ascending and descending functions, it ascends to the Intellect to take the benefits of rational order and truth, and descends to nature and lower realms to convey them.[108] Human souls, which attend in the Universal soul, however, tend to forget the higher realm, the realm of the Intellect, and to stick instead to the world of nature and to

[104] Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, 83.
[105] Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 1989), 216.
[106] A more comprehensive figure of al-Sijistani's cosmology can be found in: Ibid., 221.
[107] Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom*, 57.
[108] Walker, *Abu Ya'qub Al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary*, 43.

become enslaved by material pleasures. This is where prophecy and revelation come into play and find their desideratum.[109] To remind human soul of the higher realm of Intellect, and to gain thereby salvation the sacred law is needed. Prophets are thus, deputies of the Intellect and the Intellect is the deputy of God.

In this regard, the main question that al-Sijistani addresses is how abstract truths taken from the Intellect are transformed into verbal sounds and represented in the scripture. First of all, he is very explicit that God's commands are not sounds and letters: 'there is nothing whatsoever from sound or letter in God's command toward His creation'[110] Prophets, specifically six distinguished prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad) are law givers, and he calls them 'speaking-prophets' (*nuttaq*, sing, *natiq*). Prophets are unique in having a 'holy soul' (*al-nafs al-qudsiyya*). They are in contact with the 'Holy Spirit' (*ruh al-quds*), which is Intellect, and are inspired by it. Being deputies of the Intellect, prophets see, rather than hear from, the sublime world and form what they see in a linguistic form that is understandable to people, and necessary for their salvation.[111]

Al-Sijistani explains the process of the deliverance of God's words from God down to us as follows: first it is the word of God (*amr*) that becomes united by the first being (*al-ays al-awwal*), which is the intellect. In this level, God's word bears with it neither sound (*sawt*) not figure (*naqsh*), but it was only a known (*ma'lum*) which is bestowed by the Intellect upon the Soul. Then, God's word or command is put in a 'compository way' (*tariq al-tarkib*), and then it becomes figurative (*manqush*) but still soundless, then the prophet (*natiq*) becomes aware of these figures, and it is as if he is looking at a book and reading it, he then conveys the figures to his people through the tongue of his people, and it is at this level that God's word turned into sounds and 'tones' (*nqam*).[112]

This theory of divine revelation is especially interesting, since unlike most models of revelation in the Muslim thought which depicts revelation as auditory (as if Muhammad hears something), al-Sijistani depicts it as pictorial (as if Muhammad sees something). We will see in the next two chapters how the Soroushian theory of revelation is pictorial and visionary rather than auditory. This implies that Muhammad in the case of Islam (and other prophets), had much more of a role to play than the role assigned to him/them in the dominant theories of revelation, for example in the Hanbali theory of revelation delineated above.

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[109] *Cf.* e.g. Abu Ya'qub Al-Sijistani, *Kitab Ithbat al-Nubuwwat [Book of the Proof of the Prophecies]*, ed. 'Arif Tamir (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1982), 177. See also Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, 98.
[110] Al-Sijistani, *Kitab al-Iftikhar [Book of Boast]*, 102.
[111] Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, 117–18. See also Walker, *Abu Ya'qub Al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary*, 46–48.
[112] *Cf.* e.g.: al-Sijistani, *Kitab Ithbat al-Nubuwwat [Book of the Proof of the Prophecies]*, 151–3.

In al-Sijistani's theory of the Qur'anic revelation 'the Qur'an is the product of Muhammad's role as *natiq* and, as such, is of less sanctity than its original which is the universal form of truth and reason'.[113] The Qur'an is only a *copy* of eternal truth produced faultlessly and inimitably by Muhammad for his people. In al-Sijistani it is directly Muhammad who is law giver, and God is only remotely and metaphorically so.

3.3.4.3 Ibn al-'Arabi

Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi (560/1165-638/1240) from Murcia in the southeast Spain, mystical philosopher, poet and Sufi is regarded as 'arguably the greatest mystical genius that Islam has produced.'[114] He is widely known as 'the great master' (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) and the 'reviver of religion' (*muhyiddin*). Among his various works available today two books are prominent, one is a voluminous encyclopaedic work called 'The Meccan Illuminations' (*al-futuhat al-makkiyya*) and a much shorter work called 'The Bezels of Wisdom' (*Fusus al-Hikam*).

Ibn al-'Arabi makes a significant distinction between God's essence (*al-dat*), and God's names (*asma'*) and attributes (*sifat*). This distinction is crucial for him in order to enable him to come up with a solution to the vexing problem of how multiplicity (the fact that universe is multiple, composite and in no way simple), could be created by or stemmed from the God who is absolutely simple and free from any multiplicity (*kathra*) and compositionality (*tarkib*).

We already saw that the similar distinction made, by al-Farabi and al-Sijistani, between God and divine agencies. Intellect, as God's agency, in al-Farabi's and al-Sijistani's thought, however, is substituted by God's eternal names and attributes in Ibn al-'Arabi's thought. This is more in line with the Qur'anic portrayal of God, when for example, the Qur'an says: 'The Most Excellent Names (*al-asma' al-husna*) belong to God'.[115] God, and only God alone, knows God's essence.[116] God's names are intermediaries between God's essence and the cosmos, and they bring the cosmos to the relationship with God.

Some of God's names are 'Life', 'Knowledge', 'Desire', 'Power', 'Speech', 'Generosity', and 'Justice'. God's essence remains always inaccessible and unknowable, God is only known through God's names, that are in turn known through God's 'self-disclosures' (*al-tajalliyat al-ilahiyya*). God is present in the cosmos as far as the cosmos possesses the existence, nevertheless since the

[113] Walker, *Abu Ya'qub Al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary*, 48.
[114] Stephen Hirtenstein, "Ibn al-'Arabi, Muhyiddin," ed. Oliver Leaman, *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 163.
[115] Q. 7: 180.
[116] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 153.

creatures possess a shaky existence—due to the fact that they are 'contingent' (*mumkin*), and consequently they might be at a time and might cease to be at another time—then God is not present in them. This entails that this is only God who truly is, since God cannot cease to exist. To put it another way, God necessarily exists, and the rest is only the shadow of God's being.

Unlike al-Sijistani who explicitly refrained from attributing 'existence' in any way to God, Ibn al-'Arabi wholeheartedly attributes 'existence' or 'being' (*wujud*) to God, but he is quick to add that it is only God who truly and necessarily exists, the creatures exist only because of God and not independent of Him/Her/It. God's existence, as he puts it, is 'the very existence *per se*' (*'ayn al-wujud*).[117]

This recurring theme in Ibn al-'Arabi's thought to equate existence *par excellence* with God has led later commentators to attribute a line of thought to him famously called the doctrine of the 'Oneness of Being' (*wahdat al-wujud*). But it is to be borne in mind that the existence, in his thought, is one only in its essence and non-manifestation (*batin*), but it is many in its manifestation. Hence, existence is at the same time one, and many.[118] In this way, Ibn al-'Arabi's theology is the combination of both apophaticism and cataphaticism. It is apophatic as far as God's essence is concerned. In this way he emphatically says: 'there is no comparability (*munasaba*) of any kind between God, the Almighty, and His creatures'.[119] But it is also cataphatic as far as God's names, acts, and manifestations are concerned.

Related to Ibn al-'Arabi's theory of revelation is the doctrine of the 'five planes of divine existence' (*al-hadarat al-khamsa*). This line of thought was later developed under this title by some pupils and commentators of Ibn al-'Arabi, specially Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (605/1207-673/1274), although its trace can be found in Ibn al-'Arabi's own writings. This doctrine plays a key role in what later established itself as the intellectual school of Ibn al-'Arabi. The term *al-hadarat al-khamsa* is not Ibn al-'Arabi's own term, he uses a similar term such as 'divine presences' (*al-hadarat al-ilahiyya*) to denote The God's Most Excellent Names.[120] However a prototype of this doctrine can be found in some of his works, especially in his work 'The Description of the Encompassing Circles' (*Insha' al-Dawa'ir*).[121]

The five planes of existence are supposed to explicate how the existence is one in its essence, but many in its manifestation. The planes of existence or universal divine presences are

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[117] Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya al-Kubra, 1911), 2: 517.4.

[118] William C. Chittick, "Rumi and Wahdat Al-Wujud," in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, ed. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian, and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 76-7.

[119] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 1: 93.7.

[120] *Cf.* e.g. Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 4: 197.10.

[121] Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi, *'Anqa' Maghrib fi Khatm al-Awliya' wa Shams al-Maghrib; wa-yalih Kitab al-Hujub; wa-yalih Insha'al-dawa'ir; wa-yalih 'Uqlat al-Mustawfiz* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'llmiyyah, 2009), 145–50.

portrayed between two poles (*aqtab*, sing. *qutb*) the 'Presence of absolute Mystery' (*hadrat al-ghayb al-mutlaq*), which is the presence of God's Essence on the one hand, and the 'Presence of absolute Manifestation (*hadrat al-shahada al-mutlaq*) which is the human world, on the other hand. Between these two poles lies the 'presence of relative Mystery' (*hadrat al-qayb al-mudaf*), and some other presences. The whole spectrum of hierarchy would be as follows:

1- The 'Presence of absolute Mystery' (*hadrat al-ghayb al-mutlaq*) which is beyond name and theophany and one should be totally apophatic towards this plane of divine existence.
2- The world of the Intelligence (world of the *jabarut*) which is closest to the presence of the absolute mystery.
3- The world of immaterial Souls (world of the *malakut*).
4- The world of Idea (*'alam al-mithal*), or the world of imagination (*'alam al-khiyal*), which is an intermediary plane between matter and spirit, and closest to the sensible world.
5- The visible and sensible world *('alam al-shahada*, *'alam al-mulk*).[122]

I will refer back further to this hierarchy when discussing in detail Ibn al-'Arabi's theory of (the Qur'anic) revelation. Ibn al-'Arabi understands divine revelation in two senses: general revelation, and specific revelation. Since revelation is God's uncovering or disclosure, all that exists is God's revelation in the wide sense of the term; since all creatures reveal the fact that there is a creator. General revelation is accessible to everyone, since everyone can be illuminated through creation which is from God. But in order to know God's commands, prohibitions, names, acts and attributes we need also specific revelation. And that is reflected in the sacred books, such as the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an.[123]

To analyse the nature of the specific revelation Ibn al-'Arabi places much emphasis both ontologically and epistemologically on imagination. Imagination, either as a plane of existence or as a mode of knowing (a faculty of mind), always ontologically works as an 'isthmus' or 'boundary' (*barzakh*) between the immaterial world and the sensible world, and works epistemologically as something between the purely abstract knowledge and purely sensible knowledge. The cosmos has this in-between nature because it is neither 'absolute existent' (*wajib al-wujud*) nor 'absolute non-existent' (*mumtani' al-wujud*), rather it is like an image in the mirror that is different from what is

[122] Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 225, 361. For a slightly different formulation of the five planes of divine existence, see Dawud al-Qaysari and Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani, *Sharh Muqadamma Qaysari bar Fusus al-Hikam [A Commentary on al-Qaysari's Introduction to Ibn al-'Arabi's the Bezels of Wisdom]* (Tehran: Amir Kabri, 1991), 447–53.
[123] Robert J. Dobie, *Logos and Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 19–21.

reflected it but not totally irrelevant to it. The cosmos, in this sense, is imagination.[124]

I have already mentioned that the realm of imagination is ontologically closest to the sensible world. Ibn al-'Arabi—relatively similar to the neo-Platonic position in the analysis of revelation that we already saw in al-Farabi—takes specific revelation to be related to the realm of imagination: 'the plane of the Imagination […] is the first principle of revelation'.[125] And to this realm applies Muhammadan revelation: 'what he [Muhammad] perceived [in this state] he perceived only in the plane of Imagination except that he was not considered to be sleeping '[126] (first bracket added).

What is central in the plane of Imagination is that spiritual realities, as beings beyond any form or shape, take the corporeal form, or to put it another way, they are immaterial things that are embodied through imagination. One example in this regard, which Ibn al-'Arabi keeps repeating, is Knowledge, as a name of God, appeared to Muhammad in the form of milk.[127] Another example is the appearance of God's angel as a man to Muhammad.

I have already mentioned that al-Farabi's position on revelation is generally taken to be that revelation is simply science or philosophy adorned by symbolic forms to make it less abstract, and consequently more understandable to the masses. But unlike al-Farabi, Ibn al-'Arabi thinks that due to the inherent embodiment of human nature, purely abstract thought is impossible even in the hereafter where human beings still have a body—though an immaterial one.[128] Thus, the imaginal language of the Qur'an is more in line with our mode of being and knowing, than with the abstract way of thinking that philosophers and speculative theologians are usually fond of.

By bringing imagination ontologically and epistemologically to bear on the analysis of revelation Ibn al-'Arabi strives to explain the relationship between the Word of God, which is transcendent from and incomparable to human words, and the words of scripture taking the form of human language. Ibn al-'Arabi explains that revelation begins with 'dream vision' (*ru'ya*), and not sense perception, because what is supposed to be sent down in the process of revelation, i.e. intelligible meanings, are closer to imagination, which is more subtle than sense perception.[129]

In analysing the nature of God's revelation Ibn al-'Arabi frequently refers to a key Qur'anic verse in which the various ways of God's revelation are listed:

> It is not granted to any mortal that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a

[124] *Cf.* e.g. Ibn al-'Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 3: 47.31. See also William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 70.
[125] Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 120.
[126] Ibid., 121.
[127] *Cf.* e.g. Ibid.; *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 2: 58.9.
[128] Dobie, *Logos and Revelation*, 50.
[129] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 2: 375.32.

> veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is exalted and wise.[130]

The first way through which God speaks to human beings is through revelation (*wahy*), in a very specific meaning of inspiration and dream-vision, otherwise, generally speaking all these three ways are usually called revelation.[131] The second, is the way in which it is usually taken by Muslim exegetes, including Ibn al-'Arabi, to be the way that specifically the prophet Moses received revelation, when God did speak to him out of the burning bush.[132] And the third way, is through a messenger, an angel of God, or a prophet, who 'translates (*yutarjim*) from God'.[133]

Ibn al-'Arabi claims that it is not the case that God speaks only to prophets, but all three ways of God's speaking to human beings that the Qur'an enumerates could also be found not only among prophets, but also among God's 'saints' (*awliya'*, sing. *wali*). This question, then, immediately arises that: what is the difference between prophets and saints? The only difference between the two, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, is that no one but prophets have the right to legislation (*tashri'*), whereas saints are obliged to follow the prophet Muhammad's legislation.[134]

As quoted above, Ibn al-'Arabi argues that God's messengers translate what they receive from God for people. This seems to imply that the speech of God is different from its expression, as was the position of Ash'aris. He, however, paradoxically, states that 'the speech of God is what is recited, heard, uttered and called the Qur'an'.[135] This is a position that seems, at least on the face of it, much the same as that of Ibn Hanbal. To justify his position he appeals to a *hadith* attributed to Muhammad to the effect that God manifests Him/Her/Itself in a specific form on the day of resurrection for Muslims, and they do not recognize God as such, and reject God until God manifests Him/Her/Itself in a form that is known to their faith, and they finally recognize God as God.[136] Ibn al-'Arabi is fascinated by this hadith, and frequently refers to it. Based upon this hadith he argues that

> He whose truth is such that accepts manifestation in forms, it is not unlikely then that the speech in the form of uttered letters, called speech of God, to be a form among His forms in a manner that befits His Majesty, therefore as we say that God manifests Himself in a from likewise we can say that he speaks through voice and letter in a manner that befits His Majesty.[137]

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130 Q. 42: 51.
131 Al-Razi, *Tafsir al-Fakhr al-Razi*, 27: 188.
132 Ibn al-'Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 2: 375.21.
133 Ibid., 2: 375.18.
134 Ibid., 2: 376.6.
135 Ibid., 3: 95.24.
136 'Allah would come to Muslims in a form different from the one recognizable to them, and would say: I am your Lord. They would say: we take refuge with Allah from you. We will wait here till our Lord come to us, and when our Lord would come we would recognize Him. Then Allah would come to them in the form recognizable to them and say: I am your Lord. They would say: you are our Lord and consequently they would go after Him' Ibn al-Hajjaj Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, ed. Muhammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi (Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1954), 1: 164, hadith no. 299.
137 Ibn al-'Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 3: 95.11.

To put Ibn al-'Arabi's theory of the Qur'anic revelation in another way, he says since it is possible for God to manifest Him/Her/Itself in different forms, it is possible for God to be inlibrated, i.e. to manifest Him/Her/Itself in the form of letters and voices which are recorded in the Qur'an.

But Ibn al-'Arabi is cautious enough apophatically to immediately add that God's manifestation is unique, and has no resemblance to and comparability with anything else, including human beings. He further backs his inlibration theory of the Qur'an by referring to another Qur'anic verse, which is also one of his favourites: 'when you [Prophet] threw it was not your throw but God's'.[138] The verse refers to the battle of Badr (near Medina) that Muslims, despite being vastly outnumbered, won. Ibn al-'Arabi says the eyes see Muhammad when he throws, but actually 'it is God who is thrower in Muhammadan form';[139] likewise when Muhammad speaks, it is actually God who is speaker in the Muhammadan form. He illustrates his inlibration theory of the Qur'anic revelation as follows: 'It is as if the Qur'an took a corporeal form called Muhammad b. Abdullah b. Abd al-Mutallib and the Qur'an is God's speech and Muhammad is God's attribute.'[140]

Ibn al-'Arabi, however, is well aware of the contingencies of the legal parts of the Qur'anic revelation. According to him, when it comes to legislation, revelation is dynamic, flexible, and dialectical, to the extent that 'many of the rulings instituted by the Law have come through questions posed by the community; and without these questions, the respective prescriptions would not have been established.'[141] He therefore makes a significant distinction between the essential part of revelation, and the accidental part of revelation; a part that would have not been established had the community not posed some questions.

One might wonder, however, how can revelation, taken by Ibn al-'Arabi to be God's inlibration, contain contingent parts. God is an absolute and necessary being, and nothing emanating from Him/Her/It is otherwise than God, for there is no being other than God's being. His answer is that revelation is the manifestation of God's names through the imaginal embodiment, rather than the manifestation of God's essence which is known only to God. This imaginal embodiment is consequently sensitive to the requirements of the context to which it is addressed. That is why 'God manifested Himself to Moses in the form of the latter's need',[142] when Moses needs fire and God talks to him through the burning bush.[143]

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138 Q. 8: 18.
139 Ibn al-'Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 3: 525.34.
140 Ibid., 4: 61.2.
141 Ibid., 2: 562. 16. The translation of this sentence has been taken from: Reza Shan Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn 'Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2006), 119.
142 Ibid., *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 3: 524.18.
143 We are still not done with Ibn al-'Arabi. When discussing Shabestari in the section 3.8 below, I shall get back to him.

3.3.4.4 Fazlur Rahman

I have thus far been addressing the pre-modern Muslim or Islam-related thinkers. The story of the theories of Muslim revelation, however, does not stop there, rather it continues to be discussed in modern and contemporary Muslim theology and philosophy. Due to space limitation, however, I shall confine my discussion to only two modern Muslim thinkers.

Fazlur Rahman Malik, better known as Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988),[144] is a Pakistani scholar of Islam, and one of the pioneers of Muslim modernism in the second half of the Twentieth Century. The study of Rahman's theory of revelation and prophecy is paramount for our purposes: in addition to the general significance of Rahman's contribution to Islamic studies,[145] the theory of revelation developed by Soroush, which will be addressed in detail in the next two chapters, is much along the lines set up by Rahman. Although, I shall argue that Soroush has developed it further into an even more radical theory of Muslim revelation and prophecy.

Ebrahim Moosa, currently a Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame, has described Rahman's understanding of Islam as a 'Qur'an-centred hermeneutics', a hermeneutics that was 'a search for Islamic humanism in the modem age'.[146] Rahman recognized the radical nature of the Qur'an-centred hermeneutics that is required for revitalizing Muslim religious thought in the modern age, as well as for criticizing the inherited and ossified heritage of medieval Muslim religious thought. Rahman was astonished at realizing how far the Qur'an itself is peripheral to the different theological and juridical lenses only through which Muslims take it into account:

> although Muslims claim their beliefs, law, and spirituality are "based upon the Quran" [...], the Quran was never taught by itself in any seat of traditional learning, but always with the aid of commentaries.[147]

Rahman was firmly convinced that the Qur'an bears essentially an ethical, and not even centrally a metaphysical, framework. Therefore, he applies the priority he persistently gives to the Qur'an, which logically requires the priority of ethics, to the inherited metaphysical traditions of Muslims. In order to pave the way for the construction of Islamic humanism, Rahman invites Muslims to move away from 'the historical Islam', i.e. Islam as historically evolved, towards 'the normative

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144 *Rahman* is widely taken in the West as his family name, while it is actually the second part of his first name. His family name is *Malik*. I will follow, however, the Western way of referring to him.

145 See in this regard Richard C. Martin, "Fazlur Rahman's Contribution to Religious Studies: A Historian of Religion's Appraisal," in *Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman*, ed. Earle H. Waugh and Frederick M. Denny (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1998), 243–59.

146 Ebrahim Moosa, "Introduction," in *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, ed. Ebrahim Moosa (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 24. See also Ebrahim Moosa, "Forward," in *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xiv.

147 Fazlur Rahman, "Fazlur Rahman: My Belief-in-Action," in *The Courage of Conviction*, ed. Phillip L. Berman (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1985), 155.

Islam', namely Islam as ought to be practiced in the present and future. According to Rahman, in order to accomplish normative Islam, 'studying the Quran's social pronouncements and legal enactments in the light of its general moral teaching' is needed.[148] Thus, his Qur'an-centred hermeneutics is eventually an ethics-centred hermeneutics, a universal ethics that is deeply influenced by what he took to be the ethical spirit of the Qur'an.

One pillar of the Rahman's Qur'an-centred hermeneutics is his theory of prophecy, and the nature of revelation, without which, he thinks, an adequate apprehension of the Qur'an is unattainable.[149] In order to spell out his theory of prophecy and revelation, we first need to explain his Qur'an-centred understanding of God, since one's conception of divinity has crucial bearing on one's theory of divine revelation. A central point in Rahman's way of depicting the Qur'anic God is that for him, the God of the Qur'an is not a being among other beings, likewise God is not a truth among other truths, but God is the Truth or, in Rahman's terminology, the 'Master-Truth'.[150]

Moreover, God is not detached and separable from everything; even more than that, God lies within the integrity of everything. God is, thus, from the Qur'anic perspective, the sole meaning of reality. To substantiate his immanence-oriented understanding of God in the Qur'an, Rahman cites some Qur'anic verses such as 'We are closer to him than his jugular vein',[151] and 'Do not be like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls'.[152] He also alludes to, but does not expand upon, this point that in addition to scriptural evidence there is also rational evidence for the immanent God: 'His very infinitude implies not a one-sided transcendence but equally His being "with" His creation'.[153]

In order to draw the logical consequences of the underlying immanent portrayal of the Qur'anic God, Rahman further explains in a more explicit way that nature and God are not to be considered as two different factors, and consequently God is more a 'dimension' of nature and its meaning, rather than a being, even a transcendent one, among other beings. In a similar way, as far as human action and destiny are concerned, God and human are not *vis-à-vis* each other and they are not rivals.[154] Having drawn the immanent picture of God out of the Qur'an, he is quick to add that this portrayal does not imply that God is everything (pantheism), or even that God is *in*

148 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 141.
149 Moosa, "Introduction," 11.
150 Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.
151 Q., 50: 16.
152 Q., 59: 19.
153 Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 6.
154 Ibid., 15.

everything (pan*en*theism). God is transcendent of everything, and at the same time God's presence is all-pervasive.[155]

According to Rahman, since the human is at the centre of the Qur'an's interest, then the all-pervasiveness of God, and God's not being rival to the human, provides us with a hermeneutical insight as to the God-human relationship in the Qur'an:

> Indeed, in all the Qur'anic statements where God appears as the real subject, one can, *so far as the factual content goes*, eliminate God and translate these statements into perfectly "naturalistic" ones without any loss whatever. This is because God is not a fact among other facts.[156]

And this is also the way he interprets the divine revelation. Thus, with this quotation in mind, we are in a good position to turn specifically to his theory of divine revelation. Fazlur Rahman's theory of the Qur'anic divine revelation, is as Moosa puts it, 'a radical departure from the unsatisfactory Sunni orthodox explanation of revelation'.[157] The historically predominant understanding of revelation, or what is usually referred to as the 'orthodox' understanding of revelation, eventually interprets this phenomenon in an a-historical, or even anti-historical way.

The source of revelation, according to this interpretation, is totally outside Muhammad and even history, while the role of Muhammad in constructing the outcome of revelation is minimized to a considerable degree, if not eradicated altogether. I have already talked, in some detail, about this 'orthodox' theory of revelation especially when delineating, in this chapter, Ibn Hanbal's and al-Ash'ari's theory of revelation. Rahman intends to do justice to the 'internal' rather than 'external' aspect of revelation, an aspect that, he thinks, has been widely ignored or even denied in the 'orthodox' theory of revelation. He says

> The Quran is the divine response, through the Prophet's mind, to the moral-social situation of the Prophet's Arabia, particularly to the problems of the commercial Meccan society of his day.[158]

For Rahman, both the Prophet's mind, and historical context are central in shaping the Qur'anic divine revelation. Rahman holds that the dominant theory of revelation, by minimizing or even eradicating the role of Muhammad and his era in shaping the content of Qur'anic revelation, and by reducing Muhammad to a mere mechanical vehicle, appointed just to receive and disseminate faithfully God's message, has not only done injustice to the relationship between the historical and the divine, but also to the Qur'an itself.

In repudiating the externality of revelation, Rahman is so uncompromising that he even

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155 Ibid., 16.
156 Fazlur Rahman, "The Qur'anic Concept of God, The Universe and Man," *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (1967): 2–3; See also Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 22.
157 Moosa, "Introduction," 11.
158 Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 5.

denies, though without detailed discussion, some theories of revelation according to which the Qur'anic ideas and meanings are from God, but the verbal formulation is from Muhammad.[159] However, Rahman is well aware of, and completely sympathetic to, the main motivations behind the (full or partial) externalist theories of revelation which, in different ways, put emphasis on three features of the Qur'anic revelation: otherness (i.e. the Qur'an is unique), objectivity, and its verbal character. Rahman contends that the Qur'an endorses all these features, yet it rejects its own externality vis-à-vis Muhammad. Medieval Muslim thought was unable, however, to reconcile objectivity of the Qur'an, with its being internal to Muhammad:

> orthodoxy (indeed, all medieval thought) lacked the necessary intellectual tools to combine in its formulation of the dogma the otherness and verbal character of the revelation on the one hand, and its intimate connection with the work and the religious personality of the prophet on the other, i.e. it lacked the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad. The Qur'an obviously holds both, for if it insists that it has come to the 'heart' of the prophet, how can it be external to him?[160]

Although it seems defensible that the externalist theories of the Qur'anic revelation were dominant in medieval times, it is a matter of debate whether 'all medieval thought', as Rahman claims, lacked the required tools for reconciling the internality and objectivity of the Qur'anic revelation. We already saw that Ibn al-'Arabi, for instance, was intellectually equipped to combine, at least to a certain extent, these two aspects in his theory of divine revelation. Moreover, among the early theological theories of revelation, outlined above in this chapter, the theories of Nazzam, Bishr, Mu'ammar, Baghdadi Mu'tazilis, and Ibn Kullab can be interpreted, to a certain extent, along the line that Rahman develops.

But how can the Qur'anic revelation be both entirely divine, and at the same time entirely rooted in Muhammad himself? Rahman's answer is that the divine and Muhammad are, somehow, intimately connected to each other at the occasion of revelation. The key to this connection is, indeed, ethics. The basic *élan* of the Qur'an, Rahman argues, is ethical and more importantly even talk of God revolves around ethics; that is why 'although Allah (God) is mentioned in the Quran more than six thousand times [...] all these statements are actually statements about man.'[161] A prophet is a human with an ethical character, who is deeply concerned about the destiny of humanity, to the extent that he wholeheartedly wishes to recreate history, and to change its direction.

A prophet, moreover, is so steadfast in his mission that, as Rahman puts it, he 'transcendences himself' getting connected to the Moral Law itself that is not separable from,

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[159] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 30–31.
[160] Ibid., 31.
[161] Rahman, "The Qur'anic Concept of God," 1.

though not identical with, God.[162] The outcome of this connection is revelation, that in Islam is reflected mainly in the Qur'an. The Qur'anic divine revelation, hence, is both purely divine but, at the same time, deeply intertwined with Muhammad's personality without any contradiction:

> The Qur'an is thus pure Divine Word, but, of course, it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the prophet Muhammad whose relationship to it cannot be mechanically conceived like that of a record.[163]

Quoting Shah Waliullah of Delhi (1703-1762) a mystical reformer and prominent Muslim scholar in the Indian sub-continent, Rahman goes even one step further, arguing that for something to be divine revelation it does not necessarily need to be absent from a prophet's mind; rather, it could already be present in the prophet's mind, but at the same time be God's revelation. Shah Waliullah argues that as Shari'a does not come out of nowhere, rather it is always formulated in accordance with people's customs, the same can be said more generally about the relation between divine revelation and a prophet's mind: 'verbal revelation occurs in the mould of words, idioms and style which are already existent in the mind of Prophet'.[164]

For Rahman, therefore, due to on the one hand the all-pervasiveness of God, and the high character of God's prophets on the other hand, and also due to the fact that revelation is a divine response to human history, the human and the divine are so intimately interconnected in the occasion of revelation, that it is possible to say, without any contradiction, that revelation is purely divine, and at the same time purely human. But, is this theory of the Qur'anic revelation free from any theoretical difficulties, even if it is not contradictory? Specifically, is there any role remaining to be played by the angels widely taken to be the intermediaries between God and prophets?

Rahman's response is that in the process of revelation to the great prophets no angelic agency is involved. As always, disregarding, to a significant extent, the traditions attributed to the prophet Muhammad, as well as the theological, legal, mystical, philosophical, and exegetical traditions in the history of medieval Muslim thought;[165] Rahman appeals, in a holistic manner albeit, to the Qur'an to substantiate his position. Of course, he does not deny that in the Qur'an angels (*malak*, plural *mala'ika*) are frequently described as celestial beings acting as God's agents. When it specifically comes to divine revelation sent to the prophets, however, Rahman thinks no explicit reference to angelic involvement in this process is mentioned in the Qur'an.[166]

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[162] Rahman, *Islam*, 32.
[163] Ibid., 33.
[164] Fazlur Rahman, "Divine Revelation and the Prophet," *Hamdard Islamicus* 1, no. 2 (1978): 67.
[165] For an account of Rahman's critique of the later theological, exegetical, legal, and mystical developments in the Sunni Islam which for him is a distorted departure from the spirit of the Qur'an, see Abdullah Saeed, "Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal Content of the Qur'an," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40–41.
[166] Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 95.

If this is so, then what about frequent references to the 'Holy Spirit' (*ruh al-qudus*),[167] the 'Trustworthy Spirit',[168] or simply the 'Spirit' (*ruh*),[169] associated with the divine revelation, or more generally the divine in the Qur'an? While Rahman concedes that God may send revelation through angels to confirm and encourage believers in distress,[170] revelation to the great prophets (Noah, Abraham, Moses and Muhammad) is not through an angelic agency. Addressing some of the Qur'anic verses in which the 'Holy Spirit', the 'Trustworthy Spirit', or the 'Spirit' are mentioned, he concludes that not only do all these concepts refer to the same thing (the Spirit), but also that the Spirit is the agent of revelation. The Spirit, nevertheless, in the Qur'an does not refer to an angel, rather it refers to a spiritual and internal power or faculty bestowed upon prophets by God.

This entails that 'the Prophet has a potential Revelation in him'[171] that is actualized as a divine response to human history. Rahman argues that when it comes to prophetic revelation the Qur'an has denied angels as the agents of revelation. This argument is based on Rahman's rather unique interpretation of the verses, in which it is critically reported that the Meccan adversaries of Muhammad accused the prophet of being an ordinary person like them, and therefore not a prophet receiving revelation:

> They also say, 'What sort of messenger is this? He eats food and walks about in the marketplaces! Why has no angel been sent down to help him with his warnings? […] See what they think you are like! They have gone astray and cannot find the right way.[172]

The locus of revelation, hence, is in the Qur'anic term, the 'heart' of prophet,[173] without any angelic intermediation, although Rahman prefers to call it, in a term more understandable for a modern reader, the prophet's 'mind'.

3.3.4.5 Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari

The last theory of the Qur'anic revelation to be reviewed in this chapter belongs to Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari (b. 1936), an Iranian philosopher, theologian, religious reformist, and public intellectual, who comes from a Twelver Shi'i background. In addition to its own merits what makes Shabestari's theory of the Qur'anic revelation more relevant to our research is that his theory, along

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[167] Q. 2: 87, 253; 5: 110; 16: 102.
[168] Q. 26: 193.
[169] Q. 4: 171; 16: 2; 17: 85; 19: 17; 15: 29; 21: 91; 32: 9; 38: 72; 40: 15; 42: 52; 58: 22; 66: 12.
[170] Rahman's Qur'anic reference is to 8: 12. See *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 95.
[171] Ibid., 101.
[172] Q. 25: 7 & 9. For the dominant interpretation of these verses according to which they do not intend to deny angelic involvement in the process of prophetic revelation, rather they are intended to deny the visibility of angels as God's messengers for ordinary people in this process, see the interpretation of the verses in Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 891.
[173] Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 97.

with that of Fazlur Rahman that we have just discussed, shares a common core with the theory of Qur'anic revelation developed by Abdulkarim Soroush, to be discussed in the next three chapters.[174]

Shabestari, who is well versed in the history of Muslim theology as well as modern Protestant theology, begins his discussions on the nature of divine revelation with a short, but innovative, overview of different theories of revelation in the history of Muslim philosophy, theology, and mysticism with some allusions to its similarity with modern Christian theology. He divides Muslim theories of revelation[175] into two main categories: theories developing, despite their differences, the 'inherent revelation' (*wahy-i fi-nafsi*); and theories developing, despite their differences, what, I think can be called[176] 'relational revelation' or 'existential revelation'.

What the inherent theories of revelation have in common is that according to them something is divine revelation due to the information it conveys miraculously, regardless of the existential effect it might or might not have upon its interlocutors. This entails that something is revelation for all people.[177] What is central in the inherent theory of revelation then is that a group of propositions are conveyed miraculously that contain information about the world, and they are required for human salvation. Since this is the end result (i.e. a bunch of propositions) that makes something revelatory, this can also be called the propositional theory of revelation. Shabestari categorizes all theological theories of revelation (Ash'aries, that of Ibn Kullab and Mu'tazilies), and philosophical theories (such as the theory of Mulla Sadra) under the inherent theory of revelation.

Shabestari puts the inherent theory of revelation in sharp contrast to the relational or existential theory of revelation and prophethood. According to this theory, nothing can be considered as inherently revelatory for all people, unless a person is overwhelmingly existentially influenced by something, that thing is not a revelation for that person, but if that influence occurs, then revelation has taken place.

The same can be said about the one who is genuinely a prophet of God. No one is prophet for all people, but if someone claiming to be a prophet of God overwhelmingly influences a person existentially, then that person is prophet for such a person.[178] Being revelatory, thus, is relational

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[174] Shabestari has, thus far, been rarely studied in English speaking academia, for an illuminating overview of his philosophical theology, see Farzin Vahdat, "Post-Revolutionary Islamic Modernity in Iran: The Intersubjective Hermeneutics of Mohamad Mojtahed Shabestari," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 193–224. Reprinted in Farzin Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* (New York: Anthem Press, 2015), Ch. 6. See also Amirpur, *New Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Freedom, Democracy and Women's Rights*, Ch. 8.

[175] By which, according to our classification, he means only the approval theories of revelation.

[176] Shabestari has not given a name to the second cluster of theories.

[177] Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, *Hirmenutik, Kitab va Sunnat [Hermeneutic, the Scripture and the Tradition]*, third ed. (Tehran: Tarh-i Naw, 2014), 139.

[178] Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, *Iman va Azadi [Faith and Freedom]* (Tehran: Tarh-i Naw, 2000), 43–63.

and not inherent, existential and not irrelevant to the existential situation of the person. This entails that being produced in a miraculous way,[179] which is suggested as a criterion by some advocates of the inherent theory, is not a criterion for considering something as divine revelation, but what existentially effects some one's life wholly and deeply is the proper criterion.

To illustrate the relational theory of revelation, Shabestari frequently and extensively refers to Ibn al-'Arabi. Shabestari even claims that the relational theory of revelation has been suggested for the first time in the history of Muslim thought by Ibn al-'Arabi.[180] In response to the question 'what is revelation', without referring to miracle as a constituent of revelation, Ibn al-'Arabi argues that divine revelation is what so thoroughly overwhelms one's whole inner life in such a way that one is more affected by revelation that one's own natural disposition (*tab'*), in such a situation there remains no hesitancy and uncertainty in this regard for the recipient of revelation.[181]

Shabestari goes on to characterise Ibn al-'Arabi's relational theory of revelation as follows:

1- What make something God's word is not its propositional content, since according to Ibn al-'Arabi revelation is so quick and effective that makes it without expression (*'ibara*),[182] rather God's word is 'wholly other', as God Himself is 'wholly other'.

2- That a word is 'wholly other' does not entail that it is a violation of the laws of nature (miracle).

3- Nothing in and of itself (inherently) bears a revelatory nature; when a speech leaves an inexpressible and exceptional effect this is what makes it revelatory, otherwise it does not carry with it a revelatory feature.

4- There is no end to revelation, it is a constant phenomenon.

5- Revelatory speech does not, first and foremost, contain information. Of course, revelation has a cognitive aspect but compared to the existential effect this aspect is peripheral.[183] Elsewhere, he explains in more detail what he means by God's speech being 'wholly other':

> The word of God is a word that opens up and broadens the internal horizon of the individual. Thus, we can say a word becomes the word of God based on its effect on the listener. If the effect of a word on a listener is to draw the listener's attention toward God and opens up the horizon of the listener, that word is the word of God, whether it comes from the mouth of a prophet or another human being. It is not important from whom one hears this word.[184]

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[179] By miracle it is meant here the Humean sense of the term, that is 'a violation of the laws of nature', see above footnote 31.

[180] Mujtahed Shabestari, *Hirmenutik, Kitab va Sunnat [Hermeneutic, the Scripture and the Tradition]*, 140.

[181] Ibn al-'Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations)*, 2: 78.18-19.

[182] Ibid., 2: 78. 3-5.

[183] Mujtahed Shabestari, *Hirmenutik, Kitab va Sunnat [Hermeneutic, the Scripture and the Tradition]*, 142–3.

[184] Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, *Naqdi bar Qira'at-i Rasmi az Din: Buhranha, Chalish-ha, Rah-i Hal-ha [A Critique of the Official Reading of Religion: Crises, Challenges and Solution]* (Tehran: Tarh-i Naw, 2000), 323–4. The translation of this part has been taken from Sasan Tavassoli, *Christian Encounters with Iran: Engaging Muslim Thinkers after the Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 158.

What is key to divine revelation in the form of speech is, then, its horizon-opening character. One's horizon is opened through divine revelation when one is indulged in a thorough wonder which expands one's existential boundaries, and pushes one well beyond oneself, towards something hidden, mysterious, untamed, and tremendous. The Qur'an was revelation for Muhammad, because it had a horizon-opening character for him, and so it can be for everyone else who is in a similar situation. But Shabestari is quick to add emphatically, that if the Qur'an lacks the horizon-opening character for someone it consequently ceases to be revelatory for that person, concluding once again that something being revelatory for everyone in all situations, and for all times is a flawed understanding of divine revelation. In a way which is reminiscent of Fazlur Rahman, he goes on to say that in addition to the horizon-opening character, the Qur'an also has an ethical framework: 'any word evoking hostility and violence is not the Word of God, whatever you may call it'.[185]

More recently, specifically since 2007 onwards, Shabestari has been further developing his theory of divine revelation. This phase commenced with an interview carried out and published by the Iranian theological and philosophical quarterly journal *Madrese* (school). Upon its publication, however, the journal was banned by the officials on the charge of 'spreading unbelief (*ilhad*)'.[186] Having difficulties officially publishing his ideas on revelation as a book or essay since then, Shabestari, who is based in Iran, has published his series of articles entitled 'The Prophetic Reading of the World (*qira'at-i nabavi az jahan*) only online. In the remainder of this section, accordingly, I intend to present the gist of this important series of articles, beginning with the above-mentioned interview.[187]

His main thesis is that the Qur'an is the '*result* of revelation' (*mahsul-i vahy*), and 'not revelation *itself*' (*na khud-i vahy*). As far as divine revelation itself is concerned

> it is not the case that someone from somewhere reports to us in the form of some propositions which are capable of being true or false (*yahtamil al-sidq wa al-kidhb*), nor is it that something is given to the prophet and he interprets it and puts it into words, but what is essentially given to him is the very interpretation (*tafsir*), the very vision (*did*), what I have called it 'abrupt *blick*'.[188]

Put another way, in the light of Shabestari's own earlier discussions, revelation occurs when one's horizon is so broadened that a special vision, a hermeneutical experience, a *blick*[189] (but not initially any proposition) is given to him. The *blick* is given to the prophet in an abrupt way, the essence of

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185 Mujtahed Shabestari, *Naqdi bar Qira'at-i Rasmi*, 332.
186 Amirpur, *New Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Freedom, Democracy and Women's Rights*, 189.
187 It is worth mentioning that Shabestari's theory of revelation, despite its significance, has not yet been adequately studied in Persian or any other languages.
188 Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, "Hirminutik va Tafsir-i Dini az Jahan [Hermeneutics and the Religious Reading of the World]," *Mujtahed Shabestari's Website*, 2011, http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com.
189 A German word literally means 'look', 'glance', 'view', etc.

which is that everything comes from God, but again, this givenness is not at all in the form of a proposition such as 'everything is from God'; no proposition is essentially involved in revelation, rather a special view or vision is bestowed upon the prophet through which he sees everything differently, i.e. to see that essentially everything stems from God.

By *blick*, however, Shabestari does not intend 'the mystical unveiling' (*kashf*). Through *kashf*, hidden and unseen worlds become apparent to the prophet, but Shabestari is explicit that through *blick* the very material world we are living in, and not anything behind or hidden in it, becomes so transparent for the prophet, that he sees it as emanating from God. What we have as the Qur'an is the outcome of the prophet's seeing of the world, and reading it under the influence of the *blick* given to him. This seeing and reading, be that as it may, is contextual—like any other seeing and reading—and therefore historical. This reading, then, is to be attributed to Muhammad himself. But since the Qur'anic verses are the outcome of *blick* which is *given* to Muhammad, rather than Muhammad's own unaided seeing and reading, they are, in a metaphorical sense, God's words.[190]

The Qur'an, therefore, is Muhammad's 'prophetic reading of the world'; it is the upshot of what Shabestari calls 'the hermeneutical experience of Muhammad' which is given to Muhammad from above—or so believed Muhammad and all Muslims. The fact that the Qur'an is a 'prophetic' reading or interpretation of the world, does not exclude it from being subject to the common features of other readings. For this reason, the Qur'an, just like any other readings of the world, does not encompass the 'divine reality', since this reality by its nature is elusive. Therefore, neither the Qur'an *per se*, nor the interpretation of the Qur'an, contains final propositions on divine reality, since no human beings, including prophets, can grasp truth, divine or otherwise, as it is. Our job is only the 'perpetual interpreting'. Consequently, reinterpretation is now necessary for contemporary Muslims because 'Muhammad's world was definitely different from us'.[191] It makes the Qur'an, then, a historical text rather than a metaphysical text.[192]

Shabestari, as far as I can see, presents two main arguments for his hermeneutical theory of the Qur'anic revelation. 1- the language is, philosophically speaking, a human activity which is *only* shaped in a human form of life, and consequently it only becomes intelligible if taken to be as such. Therefore, it makes the Qur'an publicly unintelligible if the language of the Qur'an is attributed to the extra-human agent, God or angel, and thereby the only role left for Muhammad is to receive, and disseminate this language faithfully. 2- the literary genre of the Qur'an, if analysed

[190] Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, "Qira'at-i Nabavi az Jahan [A Prophetic Reading of the World], Part One," *Mujtahed Shabestari's Website*, 2015, http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, "Qira'at-i Nabavi az Jahan [A Prophetic Reading of the World] (8)," *Mujtahed Shabestari's Website*, http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com.

carefully, seems to be 'anecdote' (*hikayat*), 'narrative' (*rivayat*), and metaphor which stems from 'the hermeneutical experience of Muhammad', therefore the Qur'an is the narrative speech act of Muhammad.[193]

Shabestari explicitly extracts the logical conclusion of his theory of revelation when he concludes that 'Prophetic reading in the Qur'an bears the feature of humanity and all human virtues or deficiencies and limitations of the human world are reflected in it'.[194] It is because human language, including the prophetic language of the Qur'an, is inherently limited, and consequently 'the divine realm' (*'alam-i uluhiyyat*) cannot be shown by human language'[195]—a clearly apophatic conclusion. If God is 'wholly other', then, anything related to God is also to be wholly other, including the way God is narrated in the Qur'an, therefore the language of the Qur'an when talking about God is irreducibly and thoroughly metaphorical.[196]

3.4 Summary and Conclusion

The denial theory of revelation seems to be historically rooted in Muhammad's own time, when al-Harith for example, among others, reportedly claimed that the Qur'anic stories are not different in nature from the ancient stories of Persians. Two centuries later, a Persian doctor and philosopher Zakariyya' al-Razi, theorized the denial theory of revelation, arguing that human reason is sufficient for salvation, while prophets altogether are nothing but 'imposters' who gave rise, during their life and afterwards, to a lot of 'futile conflicts' and 'blood shedding' among people.

The approval theories of revelation are much more diverse. On the one end of its spectrum there is a highly apophatic theory of revelation, suggested by Bishr al-Marisi, and al-Sijistani according to which Allah is so transcendent that nothing, including the Qur'an, can depict God as He/She/It is. On the other end of the spectrum there is a highly cataphatic theory of revelation, suggested by Ibn Hanbal, and arguably followed by al-Ash'ari, that takes every word of the Qur'an to be eternally and directly the very speech of God. In the middle there is a theory, endorsed by Ash'aris, that the existing Qur'an is an expression of God's word, and not God's word *per se*, which is eternal and beyond any sound and letter.

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193 Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, "Qira'at-i Nabavi az Jahan [A Prophetic Reading of the World] (2)," *Mujtahed Shabestari's Website*, http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com. See also Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, "Qira'at-i Nabavi Az Jahan [A Prophetic Reading of the World] (7)," Mujtahed Shabestari's Website, accessed December 30, 2015, http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com.

194 Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, "Qira'at-i Nabavi az Jahan [A Prophetic Reading of the World] (14)," *Mujtahed Shabestari's Website*, http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com.

195 Ibid.

196 Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, "Damimi 6 bar Qira'at-i Nabavi az Jahan 15 [Appendix 6 to a Prophetic Reading of the World 15]," *Mujtahed Shabestari's Website*, accessed December 30, 2015, http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com.

As far as the aim of this research is concerned, the divergent approval theories of revelation can be divided up into two main groups: the 'internalist' and the 'externalist' theories of revelation.[197] In the externalist theories, the theories of Ibn Hanbal and al-Ash'ari being its main examples, there remains no (or very limited) place for any agency, other than God or angels, to play any active role in the process of the Qur'anic revelation, since according to them, Muhammad is nothing but the totally passive recipient of the very words of God.

But the 'internalist' theories (such as that of al-Marisi, Mu'ammar and some Ash'aris like Fakhr al-Razi) leave a possibility for the human agency in the process of revelation. It is because according to these theories the Qur'an is an expression of God's speech and this question remains open as to who the expresser is. Of course it is not God, otherwise it would become the externalist theory, and not the internalist one, therefore besides another heavenly candidate such as the angel of God (*jibril*), there remained two human candidates who could act as the Qur'anic expresser: Muhammad, or the scribes of revelation (*kuttab al-wahy*), or both.

One of the *kuttab*, in a short period of his life, reportedly claimed that he himself suggested some alterations to what is dictated to him by Muhammad, and the prophet accepted his suggestions:

> 'Abd Allah Abi Sarh was Muhammad's secretary, when Abi Sarh was dictated to write '*alim hakim* (all-knowing, all-wise) he wrote *ghafur rahim* (all-forgiving, all-compassionate), so he altered it. Then he read what he had altered. Muhammad said: that is ok, they are the same.[198]

It is reported that the Muhammad's endorsement of alteration led Abi Sarh to 'doubt', and 'disbelief.' He became an apostate, and claimed: 'if Muhammad received revelation, I could also receive it […] he said all-knowing, all-wise and I said all-forgiving, all-compassionate.'[199] Muhammad consequently ordered his followers to kill him. Although it is reported that Abi Sarh repented, and returned to Islam. The possibility of human agency in the process of revelation, by Muhammad or others or both, without necessarily compromising its divine origin, has never totally been ruled out in the history of Muslim thought, up until now. We already saw the significance of imagination in al-Farabi's theory of revelation. We also saw how for Ibn al-'Arabi, the personal needs of prophets, and the contingencies of their time shape the way they receive revelation.

But for some radical internalist theoreticians of revelation, such as Fazlur Rahman, and Shabestari, the agency which can be attributed to Muhammad—when it comes to the form and content of the Qur'an—is not only the matter of how, as Ibn al-'Arabi puts it, the prophets

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[197] These terms have been taken from Fazlur Rahman. See above section 3.7.
[198] Abū ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr Al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abd Allāh Al-Turkī, vol. 9 (Cairo: Hijr, 2001), 406.
[199] Ibid.

'translate' God's message, but also how God's message was thoroughly received in a Muhammadan way and deeply bound up with him.

It is to this, as it were, 'Muhammadanity' of Muslim revelation that we will turn in the next three chapters, when articulating the way Soroush deals with the nature of the Qur'anic revelation.

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4 The Soroushian Theory of Revelation, Its Theoretical Foundations

4.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter One, this study centres around the philosophical appraisal of the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation. In Chapter Two I delineated the realism-irrealism debate in philosophy in general and in philosophy of religion specifically, with a suggestion on how best to categorize different views in this debate. In Chapter Three I outlined different theories of revelation in the history of Muslim thought, again suggesting a new categorisation for them.

This chapter and the next help us to locate the Soroushian theory of revelation in the historical context of Muslim theology, and also in the historical context of the realism-irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy (of religion). Using the insights and tools which we have been provided with in these two chapters, in Chapter Six I will critically analyse the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation.

But we are not still at that stage. Before getting there, two more steps should be taken. The first step will be to lay down the theoretical foundations upon which the Soroushian theory of revelation has been laid. The second step is to articulate his theory of revelation. This chapter will address the first step, while the second step will be addressed in the next chapter. Only after these two preparatory chapters, will we be fully ready to embark on a critical analysis of his theory of revelation.

Abdolkarim Soroush is one of the most radical Muslim modernist reformist thinkers in the late Twentieth - early Twenty-First Century, whose own theory of revelation will be the main focus of study in the next chapter. To make full sense of his theory of revelation, however, one needs to put it within the theoretical foundations upon which his theory is gradually built; hence, this chapter aims to lay out those theoretical foundations. This chapter has three main sections: in the first section, I discuss what historically Muslim reformist thinking is, and then I argue to which specific reformist trend Soroush belongs; the second section lays out his intellectual biography; the third section, then, explicates the epistemological and theological foundations upon which he has built his theory of revelation.

4.2 Modernist-reformist Islam

It is important to be clear at the outset about the specific 'reformist' camp to which Soroush belongs, as opposed to other movements or tendencies that are usually categorized under 'reform' (*Islah*), or similar titles such as 'renewal' (*tajdid*). As Charles Kurzman, a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, and a prominent expert on Islamic movements, has pointed out, the term 'reform' has lost its ability to refer, at least without any qualification, to any movement or tendency within Muslim context, due to its various applications and overuses:

> the proliferation of Islamic authorities beyond the seminary has generated such a large variety of liberal and radical Islamic movements, all of them espousing "reform," that the word has been rendered almost meaningless. The term is so elastic, and so positively charged, that it is difficult in the early 2000s to find Muslim statements that reject reform in principle.[1]

Thus, when talking of Soroush as a reformist, in order to render it meaningful, we need to pinpoint to which reformist group we are referring.

To begin with, it is important to bear in mind that a quest for reform—if reform is taken in a rather broad sense—is not a modern quest. There has been a recurring need to rejuvenate the 'true' Islam, after a feeling that Islam among Muslims had lost its soul, and had been subject to 'distortion' and 'heretical innovation' (*bid'a*). It is claimed, consequently, that in pre-modern Islam, Shi'i and Sufi movements have taken the form of reform movements against Sunni 'orthodoxy'.[2]

More specifically, one can mention three prominent, but by no means exclusive, representatives of reform in the pre-modern history of Islam: al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), and Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (1703-62). These prominent reformers of pre-modern Islam and others like them, despite their differences, shared a strong desire to bring Muslims back to what they took to be the 'genuine' Islam, as a solution to social and political crises they thought their era encountered.[3]

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[1] Charles Kurzman, "Islamic Reform," in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Cline Maryanne Horowitz (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2005), 5: 2029.

[2] *Cf.* e.g. Fazlur Rahman, "Revival and Reform in Islam," in *The Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. 2B: Islamic Society and Civilization*, ed. P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 632–36.

[3] For an overview of the pre-modern Muslim reform, see Ebrahim Moosa and SherAli Tareen, "Revival and Reform," in *Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction*, ed. Gerhard Bowering (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 202–18. For a depiction of al-Ghazali as a reformer, see Mohamed Abubakr A. Al-Musleh, *Al-Ghazali the Islamic Reformer* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2012). For a depiction of Ibn Taymiyya as a reformer, and interestingly as a moderate one, see Yahya Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule: Ibn Taymiyya* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2006). For Shah Wali Allah of Delhi, see Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shah Wali Allah Dihlawi: 1703 - 1762* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986).

By reformer, however, we do not here mean pre-modern reformers, rather we mean those who, as a reaction to Western modernity,[4] joined the journey of reform—whatever their reaction to it might be.[5] And this journey began roughly in the Nineteenth Century. For the purpose of our research, we can divide modern Muslim reformers into two main groups: modernist, and anti-modernist reformers.

By the end of the Ninetieth Century, and more visibly by the mid-Twentieth Century there emerged anti-modernist tendencies among some Muslim reformers. Some of them even took the violent approach against western targets, and against some Muslim individuals, as well as Muslim states that they took to be westernized.[6] Soroush, however, is, without any reasonable doubt, a modernist-reformist thinker and, hence, we will be discussing the modernist-reformist trend in modern Islam in more detail. In the remainder of this section, therefore, the general characteristics of Muslim modernist reform will be sketched out. Other sections of this chapter, then, will show how these features fit well with the Soroushian intellectual project.

A defining character of Muslim modernist reformers is that they have consciously adopted the values and ideals that are widely considered as modern, such as rationality, scientific thinking, democratic governance, and an egalitarianism. The second key characteristic of Muslim modernist reformists is their deliberate usage of Muslim *Weltanschauung*, and thereby they have striven to revive or, at least, preserve Muslim faith in the modern world.[7]

Muslim modernist reformers suggest in one way or another that modernity has brought about both challenges and opportunities, whereas anti-modernist reformers tend to focus on what they take to be the challenges of modernity. Western modernity brought about two main categories of challenges for Muslim scholars with which they are still, in one way or another, dealing. The first category of challenges was legal; Western modernity, especially in the form of colonialism,

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[4] The main theoretical features of the Western modernity are characterized as 'subjectivity' (autonomous agency), and 'universality' (recognition of others as autonomous agents). For this characterization of Western modernity, and its application to Muslim modernist reformers, see Farzin Vahdat, "Critical Theory and the Islamic Encounter with Modernity," in *Islam and the West: Critical Perspectives on Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 123–37.

[5] For an overview of Islamic reformism with the focus on Iran and Turkey, see Günes Murat Tezcür, *Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey: The Paradox of Moderation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

[6] For a general overview of anti-modern militant Muslim groups in the second half of the Twentieth Century, see John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). For the biography of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), a preacher and scholar from Najd in central 'Arabia, who is widely considered to be the godfather of modern anti-Western terrorism and Islamic militancy, see Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). The author in this ground-breaking book argues that 'Abd al-Wahhab's writings reflect a figure significantly different from the contemporary Muslim terrorist groups and figures such as Osama bin Laden (1957-2011).

[7] Charles Kurzman, "The Modernist Islamic Movement," in *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4. It is also sometimes claimed that the appropriation of modern values led to what is called 'Islamic Enlightenment' in construction of which Egypt, Iran and Turkey played central roles, see in this regards Christopher De Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment: The Modern Struggle Between Faith and Reason* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017).

introduced, if not imposed on Muslim countries, modern secular legal frameworks which seemed at least initially alien, if not hostile, to Muslim juristic traditions.[8]

An engagement with the legal challenge of modernity has pushed Muslim scholars toward a much deeper theological challenge with modernity. This challenge divided Muslim scholars into traditionalist, and rationalist groups.[9] While for anti-modernist reformers these challenges threat the very existence of Islam, for Muslim modernist reformers western modernity might help revive what they took to be the 'true' spirit of Islam.

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), one of the most prominent Muslim modernists, for instance, goes even further, positing that the western battle against religious and political despotism—that he thinks respectively represented by Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1772-1778)—is more in line with the fundamental tenets of Islam than with Christian Church dogmas and religious system.[10]

Among prominent figures of modernist reformers one can mention Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi of Egypt (1801-1873),[11] Sayyid Ahmad Khan of North India (1817-1898),[12] Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani of arguably Iran or Afghanistan (1838-1897),[13] Muhammad 'Abduh of Egypt (1849-1905),[14] Qasim Amin of Egypt (1863-1908),[15] and Muhammad Iqbal[16] of North India.[17] The date 1840 has roughly been marked as the emergence of Muslim modernist reformism.[18] By the 1930s,

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[8] For an informed study of different aspects of this ongoing challenge, see Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *Islamic Law and the Challenges of Modernity* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004).

[9] For an overview of the theological challenge of modernity in only Sunni Islam, see Nedžad Grabus, "Islamic Theology between Tradition and Challenge of Modernity," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012): 267–77.

[10] Muhammad Iqbal, "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal," in *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 306–7. See also Michaelle Browers and Charles Kurzman, "Comparing Reformations," in *An Islamic Reformation?*, ed. Michaelle Browers and Charles Kurzman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 3–5. Muhammad Khalid Masud, "Iqbal's Approach to Islamic Theology of Modernity," *Al-Hikmat* 27 (2007): 1–36.

[11] Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi was an Egyptian scholar trained in al-Azhar. He travelled to Paris, and there he gained familiarity with European ideas. He contributed to the development of a new educational system in Egypt. See Daniel Newman, *Rifa'a al Tahtawi: A 19th-Century Egyptian Educationalist and Reformer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

[12] Sayyid Ahmad Khan was a reformer, and modern theologian in British India. See Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Delhi: Vikas, 1978).

[13] Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was a political activist, and Ideologue with pan-Islamic ideas. See Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani": A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

[14] Muhammad Abduh was the Mufti of Egypt, and a leading Muslim modernist. See Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (London: Oneworld, 2010).

[15] Qasim Amin was a leading nationalist, and feminist Egyptian whose book 'The liberation of women' has been very influential for Egypt and the Muslim world in general. See Hoda Elsadda, "Amin, Qasim," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al., 2007, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/*-SIM_0215.

[16] Muhammad Iqbal was a pre-eminent poet, thinker, and political activist of British India. See Mustansir Mir, *Iqbal* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006).

[17] For an overview of life and thought of these and other modernist thinkers, see Charles Kurzman, ed., *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); see also Nasr Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought, A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), Chs. 3 & 4.

[18] Kurzman, "The Modernist Islamic Movement," 4.

however, Muslim modernist reformation was in decline, due to, on the one hand, the rapid rise of secular movements (such as socialism and nationalism) emphasizing the modernist aspect of modernist Islam and, on the other hand, due to the rapid rise of religious revivalist movements emphasizing the Islamic aspect of modernist Islam.[19]

In the late Twentieth Century nonetheless, the Muslim modernist reform movement was revived in a more radical form. Kurzman calls this recent version of modernist Islam 'liberal Islam'.[20] Opposition to theocracy, defence of democracy, the rights of women and non-Muslims in Muslim countries, freedom of thought, also the possibility, necessity and desirability of fundamental reinterpretation of Islam, and the critique of imitation (*taqlid*) in religious affairs are some of the main characteristics of liberal Islam.

Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf-Allah of Egypt (1916-1991),[21] Ali Abd al-Raziq of Egypt (1888-1966),[22] Mahmoud Taleghani of Iran (1911-1979),[23] Mehdi Bazargan of Iran (1907 –1995),[24] Fatima Mernissi of Morocco (1940-2015),[25] Amina Wadud of America (1952-),[26] Muhammad Shahrour of Syria (1938-),[27] Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im of Sudan (1946),[28] Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (1909

[19] Ibid., 26; Charles Kurzman, "Liberal Islam and Its Islamic Context," in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.
[20] Ibid., 4; See also David D. Commins, "Modernism," ed. John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 118.
[21] Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf-Allah was an Egyptian literary scholar, linguist, and modernist thinker. For a short review of his contribution to the modern conception of the Qur'an, see Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 4th ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2012), 254–7.
[22] Ali Abd al-Raziq was an Egyptian jurist who was trained both in Oxford and al-Azhar. See Souad T. Ali, *A Religion, Not a State: Ali 'Abd Al-Raziq's Islamic Justification of Political Secularism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009).
[23] Mahmoud Taleghani was an Iranian theologian and one of the fathers of 1979 Iranian Revolution. A monograph in English about his life, thought, and legacy is yet to be written. In Persian, see Mohammad Esfandiari, *Payk-i Aftab (Pazhuhishi Dar Karnami Zindigi va Fikri-yi Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmoud Taleghani) [Messenger of the Sun (An Inquiry into the Life and Thought of Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmoud Taleghani]* (Qum: Sahife Kherad, 2005).
[24] Mehdi Bazargan was an Iranian scholar of Islam, and liberal political dissident before and after the 1979 Revolution. He was also the first Prime Minister after the 1979 Revolution. See Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick/London: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 324–66.
[25] Fatima Mernissi was a Moroccan feminist author, and sociologist. See Raja Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010).
[26] Amina Wadud is a scholar of Islam, and a prominent Muslim feminist. For an overview of her feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an, see Asma Barlas, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Quran: Women Rereading Sacred Texts," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 97–123.
[27] Muhammad Shahrour is a Syrian scholar of Islam, and modernist thinker. See Muhammad Shahrur, *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, ed. and trans. Andreas Christmann (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009).
[28] Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im is Charles Howard Candler Professor of Law at Emory University. See Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Islam and Human Rights: Selected Essays of Abdullahi An-Na'im*, ed. edited by Mashood A. Baderin (Routledge, 2010).

–1985) of Sudan,[29] Nurcholish Madjid of Indonesia (1939–2005),[30] and Fazlur Rahman of Pakistan (1919-1988)[31] are just some prominent thinkers and scholars who can be categorized under liberal Islam.[32]

Some factors have contributed to the re-emergence of modern Islam in the form of liberal Islam, among which three factors seem more prominent: one factor is widespread higher education, which has seriously broken the monopoly of the traditional religious scholars (*'ulama'*), and institutions on religious education. The significant numbers of liberal reformers have not been trained in seminaries, but in natural and human sciences (such as Shahrour, Taha, Bazargan, and Mernissi), and some others (such as Taleghani), though trained in seminary, they have been heavily influenced by modern ideologies such as Marxism, Socialism, and Liberalism.

One telling example of non-traditional religious institutions is the 'Hizmet (i.e. service to humanity) movement' founded by Fethullah Gülen (1941-), a modernist preacher, spiritual leader, writer, and poet from Turkey. The movement, amongst other things, includes 'Gülen schools' first established in Izmir in 1982, and were gradually developed in such a scale that by 2010 it is estimated that there were over eight hundred Gülen schools in 120 countries all over the world.[33]

The second factor is the expansion of international communications, the most recent case of which is the widespread use of the internet that has facilitated contact and interaction between intellectuals and their interlocutors around the globe. The third factor is the failure of Islamic regimes. There seems to be an increasingly widespread sense that Islamic regimes from Sudan to Pakistan, and from Afghanistan (in the Taliban's era, or now in parts that are under the Taliban's control), to Iran, and recently ISIS (in some parts of Syria and Iraq), have not lived up to their 'egalitarian', and 'emancipatory' promises in such a way that the process of Islamization of governance in these and other Muslim countries have not made the situation of Muslims ethically as well as in terms of welfare issues better than before, and may in fact be worse.[34]

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[29] Mahmud Muhammad Taha was a scholar of Islam, and modernist thinker. He was accused of apostasy and executed. See Mohamed A. Mahmoud, *Quest for Divinity: A Critical Examination of the Thought of Mahmud Muhammad Taha* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

[30] Nurcholish Madjid was an Indonesian scholar of Islam, and a modernist intellectual. See M. B. Hooker and Virginia Hooker, "Faith and Knowledge: Nurcholish Madjid as Educator and Philosopher," *Review of Indonesian & Malaysian Affairs* 43, no. 2 (2009): 1–12.

[31] Fazlur Rahman was a prominent Pakistani scholar of Islam, and modernist reformer. For the only scholarly monograph published so far in English about his thought, see Donald L. Berry, *Islam and Modernity Through the Writings of Islamic Modernist Fazlur Rahman* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2003).

[32] For these and other thinkers, see Charles Kurzman, ed., *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[33] Trudy D. Conway, *Cross-Cultural Dialogue on the Virtues: The Contribution of Fethullah Gülen* (New York: Springer, 2014), 6-7. For the Hizmet movement, see Martin E. Marty, ed., *Hizmet Means Service: Perspectives on an Alternative Path Within Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

[34] Charles Kurzman, "Liberal Islam: Prospects and Challenges," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, no. 3 (September 1999): 13–16.

Liberal Muslims, some prominent figures of whom are mentioned above, have drawn on three different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, hermeneutical strategies to lay the foundation of liberal Islam:

1) the Liberal Shari'a.
2) the silent Shari'a.
3) the interpreted Shari'a.[35]

The 'Liberal Shari'a' argues that the spirit governing the Qur'an, and the authentic prophetic traditions follow liberal positions, such as democratic governance, and tolerance. The second strategy, 'silent Shari'a', posits that Shari'a has been deliberately silent on some issues just to let humans choose for themselves and, thus, different opinions on these issues are to be tolerated, and even embraced. While the first two strategies can be complimentary, the third strategy is more suitable for the fundamental re-interpretation of some Qur'anic verses which are taken by modernist Muslims to be problematic,[36] or some prophetic traditions that seem incompatible with the liberal stance.[37] This implies that the predominant interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna, which has gained the status of 'orthodoxy', has no final say on religious issues.

I shall argue below that Soroush tries to lay the epistemological foundations of the 'interpreted Shari'a' strategy, a foundation upon which he also builds his own theory of religion in general, and his theory of the Qur'anic revelation specifically. In the next section, I offer a glimpse of the intellectual milestones of his life, before turning to his epistemology of religion, and then his general theory of religion.

4.3 Soroush: A Glance at His Intellectual Milestones

To get a more contextualized sense of the Soroushian epistemology (of religion), his theory of religion, and specifically his theory of the Qur'anic revelation, first it seems appropriate to take a glance at his intellectual Milestones.[38]

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[35] For more on these distinctions, see Charles Kurzman, "Liberal Islam: Prospects and Challenges," in *Revolutionaries and Reformers: Contemporary Islamist Movements in the Middle East*, ed. Barry Rubin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 191–201.

[36] Such as Q. 4: 34. This verse is commonly, but not unanimously, interpreted as allowing a husband to beat his wife under certain circumstances. For an overview of the interpretation of this verse see Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 207-8.

[37] Charles Kurzman, "Tropes and Challenges of Islamic Toleration," in *Toleration on Trial*, ed. Ingrid Creppell, Russell Hardin, and Stephen Macedo (Lexington Books, 2008), 154–6. Idem, "Liberal Islam and Its Islamic Context," 14–18.

[38] An intellectual, as well as political biography of Soroush is yet to be written. It is worth mentioning that a detailed intellectual and political biography of Soroush, in the form of a series of interviews conducted by his elder son Soroush Dabbaq is being prepared to be published.

Hossein Haj Faraj Dabbaqh, better known by his pen-name 'Abdolkarim Soroush', was born in December 16, 1945 (1324, Iranian Hijri) in southern Tehran, the capital of Iran. He was born and grew up in a devoted Twelver Shi'i family from a low middle class, with his father being a businessman. His parents both originated from Tehran. Soroush spent his secondary education mainly at 'Alavi High School, a school founded in 1955, with the aim of making students equipped with the modern sciences in addition to receiving a religious upbringing.[39] His training at 'Alavi school made him familiar with both modern sciences, especially natural sciences, and religious issues, a combination that was not common in Iranian education at that time. This left a lasting effect on him. After finishing high school, Soroush studied Pharmacy at Tehran University, and in 1973 he left Iran for London to continue his studies. He received an MSc in Analytic Chemistry from the University of London, and then he started his PhD in History and Philosophy of Science at Chelsea College.[40]

While still in England, Soroush published his first book in Iran called *Dialectical Antagonism* (*Tazadd-i Dialiktiki*).[41] The book was based on some of his speeches criticizing Marxist ideology. At the same time, he wrote *The Restless nature of the World* (*nahad-i na-aram-i jahan*), a book in Muslim Sadrian philosophy.[42] Through the advice of Mutahhari, Khomeini read the book and admired it.[43] A few months after the 1979 Revolution, without completing his doctoral dissertation,[44] Soroush returned to Iran, and there he published another book called *Knowledge and Value* (*Danish va Arzish*), a book which had been completed in England.[45]

A year later, all universities were shut down, and a new body was formed by the name of the 'Cultural Revolution Headquarters' (*sitad-i inqilab-i farhangi*) comprising seven members, including 'Abdolkarim Soroush, all of whom were directly appointed by Khomeini. The headquarters intended to prepare the re-opening of the universities, and total restructuring of the syllabi to make universities more Islamic, and revolutionary, and transforming them from being under the influence of a Westernized culture to an Islamic one.[46]

In 1983, due to certain differences emerging between him and the management of the 'Teacher Training College', Soroush was transferred to the Institute for 'Cultural Research and

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[39] Kristian P. Alexander, "Soroush, Abdolkarim (1945-)," in *Biographical Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Michael R. Fischbach (New York: Thomson Gale, 2008), 2: 777.
[40] The college as such no longer exists. It amalgamated into King's College London in 1985.
[41] Initially published by Hekmat, Tehran, 1979.
[42] Initially published by Qalam, Tehran, 1982.
[43] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qissi-yi Arbab-i Ma'rifat [The Story of the Masters of Knowledge]* (Tehran: Serat, 1997), XXIX.
[44] Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 198, footnote 4.
[45] Initially published in 1979.
[46] Yvette Hovsepian-Bearce, *The Political Ideology of Ayatollah Khamenei: Out of the Mouth of the Supreme Leader of Iran* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 79.

Studies' where he served as a research member of staff, and in 1992 founded the faculty of history and philosophy of science at the Institute for 'Cultural Research and Studies'. He submitted his resignation from the membership in the 'Cultural Revolution Headquarters' to Khomeini, and since then he has held no official position within the ruling system of Iran.

During the 1990s, Soroush gradually became more critical of the political role played by the Iranian ruling clergy and the ideology behind it. He did not hesitate to appear as a theoretical, as well as political critic of the political system, a system to the early phase of which he had contributed. From 1988 to 1990, Soroush published a series of articles in *Kayhan Farhangi*, a journal devoted to the social and human sciences. Then, it was another journal called *Kiyan*, the monthly journal devoted mainly to the dissemination of his ideas, that soon became the most visible forum ever for what is famously called 'religious intellectualism' (*rushanfikri dini*), or sometimes called 'religious new-thinking' (*nu-andishi dini*).

In the journal *Kiyan*, from its inception in 1991, till its closing down in 2000 he published the majority of his most controversial articles on philosophical and theological issues such as religious pluralism, hermeneutics, tolerance, clericalism, reason, and religion etc., the articles that later constituted a significant part of his books. The journal was closed down in 2000 by Iranian judiciary authorities, along with many other journals and newspapers.

The speeches by Soroush on various social, political, philosophical, religious and literary subjects delivered all over the world were widely in circulation in Iran and elsewhere, especially through the internet. Soon, he not only became subject to harassment and state censorship, but also lost his job and security. As just one example, in 1996, he was dismissed from Tehran University. His public lectures at Iranian universities were often disrupted by hard-line vigilante groups.[47] This forced him to go into a self-imposed exile.

From the year 2000 onwards, Abdolkarim Soroush has been a visiting Professor or visiting scholar in a number of universities and research centres, such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, the Wissenschaftkolleg in Berlin, Columbia University, Georgetown University, and the University of Chicago.[48]

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[47] Vali Nasr and Ali Gheissari, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118.

[48] For short intellectual biography of Soroush, see Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Ch. 1. Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953-2000: From Bazargan to Soroush* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 143–6.

4.4 The Theoretical Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge

As mentioned above, the interpreted Shari'a is a hermeneutical way to lay the foundation of a liberal understanding of Islam, and to vindicate the critique of an anti-liberal understanding of Islam. Compared with liberal Shari'a, and silent Shari'a, interpreted Shari'a seems more at odds with 'orthodox' Islam. While the advocates of 'orthodox' Islam tend to keep a monopoly over the interpretation of Islam by making an emphasis on what they take to be the single and unanimous interpretation of the Qur'an and Muslim tradition. The advocates of interpreted Shari'a tend to show that not only in principle, but also in reality, interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna has never been single and unanimous; rather, it has always been inevitably diverse.

To demonstrate how inevitably and irreducibly diverse the interpretation of Islam has been, and more importantly how it ought to be so, Soroush has developed what can be called an epistemological theory of religion, and more specifically a hermeneutical theory of religion. Soroush called his theory 'the theoretical contraction and expansion of religious knowledge' (*Qabz va Bast-i Ti'urik-i Shari'at*). The basic tenets of this theory, its results. and the arguments presented for its support will be explicated in the following section. In summary, I argue that the theory of contraction and expansion provides, *inter alia*, the theoretical base for 'many interpreted' hermeneutical strategies of understanding religion.

The theory of contraction and expansion was initially discussed in a series of consecutive articles published in the intellectual journal *Kayhan Farhangi*. These series which include seven articles published from 1988 (1367, Persian Islamic calendar) to 1990 (1369, Persian Islamic calendar) in this journal. With some addenda, they were later published as a book (first edition 1991, second edition 1994).[49] Almost immediately after publishing only the first two articles there arose an increasing number of controversies around the theory, and some articles and books were published, mainly by the conservative authors, to criticize the theory.[50] Ever since then, the theory of contraction and expansion has been exerting a significant influence on the religious thought of

[49] Although this book has been translated into English, it has not yet been edited and published. One can find in English, however, the general basis of the theory in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, Ch. 5. And also in this article of Soroush: "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 244–51. The book, however, has been translated into Arabic and published under the title *Al-Qabd wa al-Bast fi al-Shari'ah*, trans. Abbas Dalal (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 2002).

[50] Some books published by the conservatives within Iran criticizing the theory are: 'Abd Allah Javadi Amuli, *Shari'at dar Ayina-yi Ma'rifat [Religion in the Mirror of Knowledge]* (Tehran: Raja', 1992). Sadeq Larijani, *Ma'rifat Dini: Naqdi Bar Nazariyya-yi Qabz va Bast-i Ti'urik-i Shari'at [Religious Knowledge: A Critique of the Theory of Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge]* (Tehran: Markaz tarjoma va nashr-i kitab, 1991). idem, *Qabz va Bast Dar Qabz va Basti Digar [Contraction and Expansion of the Theory of Contraction and Expansion]* (Tehran: Markaz tarjoma va nashr-i kitab, 1993). Hossein Qaffari, *Naqd-i Nazariyya-yi Shari'at-i Samit [The Critique of Silent Shari'a]* (Hikmat, 1989).

post-revolutionary Iran.[51]

The theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge can be classified as a theory in 'social epistemology'. Social epistemology investigates 'the epistemic effects of social interactions and social systems'.[52] More specifically, it is a theory in social epistemology of religion. The main theoretical aim of this theory, generally speaking, is to make sense of, and theorize the growth of religious knowledge. It has three main elements: description (the theory reports the occurrence of change and evolution in religious thought), explanation (it suggests what the causes are behind the evolution of religious thought), and prescription (it suggest how to improve religious knowledge).[53]

The essence of the theory of contraction and expansion can be formulated as follows:

1- religious knowledge is not the same thing as religion *per se*;

2- religious knowledge is characteristically human, historical, provisional, collective (*jam'i*), flowing (*jari*), fallible, and revisable, while religion *per se* is, by definition, divine, and unchangeable;

3- religious knowledge is deeply and thoroughly influenced by other branches of human knowledge (natural and human sciences as well as mystical learnings), in such a way that any fundamental change (contraction and expansion) in other branches of knowledge has an inevitably significant bearing on religious knowledge, and leads to contraction and expansion of religious knowledge;

4- the deep and thorough influence by other branches of knowledge is due to the fact that all branches of knowledge, however seemingly unrelated and detached, are actually interrelated and interconnected;

5- a proper religious knowledge cannot then be detached from taking into consideration the best developments of other branches of knowledge;

6- since the rise of modern times and onwards, natural sciences as well as humanities and social sciences have undergone deep changes and challenges;

7- our understanding of religion needs to be fundamentally reconsidered and reconstructed

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[51] To make just one telling example, in a 2014 Facebook survey I personally conducted it was asked from more than 80 middle class educated Iranian students and researchers within and outside Iran to list ten most influential books they have ever read. The result of the survey showed that two of Soroush's book were in the top ten list, with his book 'The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge' being by far the most influential book of the whole list. For a report of this survey, see "Asarnama: Rushanfikran-i Javan-i Irani Chi Kitabhayi Mikhannad? [The Most Effective Book List: What Books Do Iranian Young Intellectuals Read?]," *Dinonline*, 2014, http://www.dinonline.com/doc/news/fa/3903/.

[52] Alvin Goldman and Thomas Blanchard, "Social Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2015, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/epistemology-social/.

[53] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-i Ti'urik-i Shari'at, Nazariyya-yi Takamul-i Ma'rifat-i Dini [The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge, a Theory of the Evolution of Religious Knowledge]* (Tehran: Sirat, 1996), 201.

in the light of modern natural, humanities and social sciences to accommodate these changes and challenges.

In this way Soroush tries to pave the way for the recognition of different interpretations of religion. Moreover, he makes such a plurality of interpretations a desideratum in such a way that a pre-modern dominant interpretation of Islam, which is usually revered as 'orthodox' by the majority of Muslims, is thereby cast into doubt, if not altogether discredited, due to the fact that Muslims are today living in a different time.

Soroush seemed to be more or less aware of the revolutionary and idiosyncratic outcome of his theory. He thereby lists results (*samarat*) of the theory of contraction and expansion. Some of these results are:

1- reconciliation of religion and democracy: a religious state in matters of justice, and good governance should benefit from the collective reason (*'aql-i jam'i*), and should recognize the priority of justice over religion and the fallibility of religious interpretations.[54]

2- taking the historicity of religious knowledge seriously: if our interpretations of religion are deeply influenced by our era and by different branches of knowledge, the historicity of our knowledge is then established.

3- this historicity, thus, gives ground for the historical criticism of different conceptions of religion.

4- the theory by laying high emphasis on the collective and flowing nature of religious knowledge, provides a hindrance to the ideologization of religion, that is, a hindrance to come up with a single, definite, un-revisable, and official interpretation of religion.

5- if there is no 'official' and 'orthodox' interpretation of religion, then there should be no official group of interpreters of religion (usually a clerical hierarchy). whose duty is to safeguard the 'true' and 'orthodox' interpretation of religion.[55] Hence, this theory has some anti-clerical consequences.[56]

6- reconciliation of changeable and unchangeable in religion, sacred and secular opens a

[54] For more on the reconciliation of democracy and religion according to Soroush, see Abdolkarim Soroush, *Farbih-tar az Idi'uluzhi [loftier Than Ideology]* (Tehran: Sirat, 1994), 273–83.

[55] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast,* 32–6.

[56] This is the most immediately discernible political consequence of the theory. The multi-vocality of religion, i.e. that religion is in principle interpreted in different ways, provides the foundation for democracy. Since there is no final interpretation of religion, no exclusively authoritative class of interpreters can exist, rather different interpretations of religion should interact with each other and with non-religious knowledge in a reciprocal and dialogical way. This leads to collective reasoning rather than 'ulama's monopoly over the interpretation of religion. For the political significance of the theory of contraction and expansion, see Meysam Badamchi, *Post-Islamist Political Theory: Iranian Intellectuals and Political Liberalism in Dialogue* (New York: Springer, 2017), 81–4.

> genuine dialogue between tradition and modernity. The development of modern Muslim theology (*kalam-i jadid*) needs a hermeneutical-epistemological theory to make this reconciliation possible. The theory of contraction and expansions claims to meet this need.[57]

How does Soroush argue for different parts of his theory? To substantiate the first half of the third part of the theory (that religious knowledge is deeply influenced by other branches of knowledge), which is among the descriptive part of his theory, he makes a distinction between 'producing sciences' (*'ulum taulid kunanda*), and 'consuming sciences' (*'ulum masraf kunanda*). Producing sciences have a theoretical aspect, and they are law-making, such as physics, chemistry, and philosophy. Consuming sciences make use of theoretical sciences in practical issues. Soroush makes the example of medicine in which a physician has to be well acquainted with basic medical sciences, such as biochemistry, physiology, anatomy, and also he/she should be skilled enough to utilize them in order to accurately diagnose a disease, and cure it in an efficient way. Although all sciences are, in a sense, consuming sciences, and they affect and are affected by each other, some sciences are so consuming that is has become their main characteristics to be so.

Soroush then argues that religious knowledge is also among the consuming sciences, and it benefits from producing sciences such as philosophy, history, sociology, and natural sciences and any change in underlying producing sciences would definitely influence religious knowledge.[58] He concludes that 'the improvement of consuming sciences is due to the improvement of producing sciences'.[59]

To illustrate the influence of religious knowledge by other branches of knowledge he offers some examples. For instance, Qur'anic exegesis, as a branch of religious knowledge, is deeply and thoroughly dependent on linguistics (grammar, morphology, syntax, rhetoric, etc.), and linguistics is an extra-religious knowledge (*ma'rifat-i birun-i dini*), i.e. it is not taught by prophets, rather it is a secular discipline, that is historically developed which is applicable to both religious and secular texts and speeches alike.[60]

Soroush formulates the second half of the third part of his theory, (which says the influence that other branches of knowledge exert on religious knowledge is such that any fundamental change in other branches of knowledge has an inevitably significant bearing on religious knowledge) as follows:

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[57] Soroush, *Qabz va Bast*, 52.
[58] Ibid., 88–90.
[59] Ibid., 149.
[60] Ibid., 158.

> The different segments of human knowledge are engaged in constant commerce and are firmly interrelated. If a novel idea surfaces in science, it will have an impact on epistemology or philosophy. And a change in philosophical understanding will change people's understanding of human beings and the cosmos. When human beings and the cosmos take on a new countenance, religious knowledge, too, takes on a new meaning.[61]

To argue for the deep and thorough interconnectedness of the religious and the secular branches of knowledge, Soroush offers some historical examples. He explains that the consequences of accepting scientific theories have been far-reaching for religious knowledge. For example, the idea that the earth is in perpetual motion did not only amount to the denial of the archaic conception of the earth to the effect that 'the earth is stationary', rather it laid the foundations of an entire new science and philosophy, 'it changed the place of the human being in the cosmic order and signalled the need for fresh reflection in the field of epistemology'.[62] The new conception of the earth also convinced a growing number of Christian and Jewish theologians to revisit and reconsider their interpretation of some segments of their scripture. It has a very important hermeneutical implication, that 'the apparent meaning' (*zuhur*) [of religious text] is not absolute and eternal, and that people's understanding of religion, like their understanding of nature, is in a state of flux'.[63]

The non-absoluteness of the meaning of a text, which is a kind of 'semantic indeterminacy', seems to play a key role in the theory of contraction and expansion.[64] Relatedly, Soroush suggests a holistic theory of meaning, rather than an atomistic theory:

> The meaning of a proposition or an event is not a juice that is squeezed out of it, but a garment that is thrown over it. It is a relationship that it falls into when it joins the other elements in an aggregate. This is why, when an element within the aggregate (viz. the recipient's mental and theoretical capital) changes, so, too, will the resulting compound and the relationship between its elements (viz. meaning and substance).[65]

In order to know the meaning of a proposition according to the holistic theory of meaning it is necessary, but not enough, to know the text, subtext, context, and other related parts of the text. In addition to these elements, however, one needs to examine one's own presuppositions that inevitably interfere in the process of interpretation of the text. When some significant elements of these presuppositions, which constitute an aggregate, change, then the whole aggregate needs to be reshuffled, if one intends to have a coherent and consistent interpretation of religious text. This

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[61] Ibid., 165. Unless otherwise mentioned the translation of the direct quotations of *Qabz va Bast* is taken from the unpublished English translation by Nilou Mobasser (1960?-2012) a BBC correspondent and translator, though I have sometimes modified her translation. Still, the reference would be to the original Persian. I am grateful to Abdolkarim Soroush and his son Hossein Dabbaq for kindly letting me have access to a typescript of the translation.

[62] Soroush, *Qabz va Bast*, 166.

[63] Ibid., 167.

[64] Semantic indeterminacy can be taken as an indeterminacy stemming from 'the semantic or otherwise representational features of expressions/concepts used to articulate any given instance of the phenomenon.' David E. Taylor and Alexis Burgess, "What in the World Is Semantic Indeterminacy?," *Analytic Philosophy* 56, no. 4 (2015): 298.

[65] Soroush, *Qabz va Bast*, 182.

entails that the interpretation of a text is not a fixed and determined enterprise. This holistic and indeterminate theory of meaning entails that concepts, including empirical concepts, are open-textured:[66]

> No written text spells out its meaning. It is a mind, which is conversant with the text's language, that reads meaning into it. Expressions (*'ibarat*) are hungry for meanings, not pregnant with them; although not every meaning agrees with their palate.[67]

To substantiate the second part of his theory (that religious knowledge is human, historical, provisional, collective, flowing, fallible and revisable, while religious *per se* is, by definition, divine and unchangeable) he appeals to a distinction between two different states of any knowledge: 'ought' state (*maqam-i bayad*), and 'is' state (*maqam-i ast*). An ought state is an ideal state, that any branch of knowledge is supposed to get close to. For instance, medicine, by definition, is the science and practice of the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease. Medicine ought to be ideal as it is described by the above definition of the discipline, but in practice it always falls short of the ideal situation depicted in that definition. Medicine by definition is pure and complete, while it is not so in its actualization.

And the same is true of religious knowledge. Religion *per se* is, by definition, pure, infallible, and metahistorical; while religious knowledge is historical, fallible and revisable, and is coloured by human psychology, and historical ups and downs.[68] Soroush further defends the distinction between the ideal and actual knowledge in the field of religion by repudiating the traditional position that since religion is divine (and divinity guarantees perfection), then religious knowledge is also divine, and therefore bears the characteristic of perfection. Soroush argues that religion's divinity, unity, and perfection by no means guarantee the perfection of understanding of religion. It is because 'when religion falls into the hands of human beings and is digested by their minds, it becomes subject to the laws that govern human knowledge and takes its place among the other branches of learning.'[69] And the most important law governing human knowledge, according to Soroush, is that religious knowledge, like any other branches of knowledge is historical, flowing, fallible, revisable, and collective.

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[66] Open-texture, especially that of empirical concepts, is taken to mean 'most of our empirical concepts are not delimited in all possible directions.' F. Waismann, "Verifiability," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 19 (1945): 122. The term is used, mainly in philosophy of science and philosophy of law, to indicate that it is always possible to find unforeseen cases in which it is not clear whether or how the concept should be applied. A case in point would be the term 'mother', that due to the advancement of technology is now an ambiguous term between the one who produces ova, and the one who carries the foetus to term. Leslie F. Stevenson, "Open Texture," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 635.
[67] Soroush, *Qabz va Bast*, 287–88.
[68] Ibid., 96–113.
[69] Ibid., 207.

To argue for the fourth part of his theory (that all branches of knowledge are interrelated and interconnected) Soroush begins with a classification. He argues that the ways different branches of knowledge are interrelated and interconnected can be classified as follows:

1- the new data prove or confirms the previous data,
2- the new data refutes or falsifies the previous data,
3- the new data narrows or broadens the meaning and purport of the previous data,
4- the new data changes altogether the meaning and purport of the previous data.

Soroush then gives some examples to illustrate all these different ways of the interconnectedness of divergent, and seemingly unrelated, branches of knowledge.[70] This interconnectedness characterizes the social, collective and historical nature of knowledge.[71] He specifically puts a heavy emphasis on this point that with 'the complete debunking of ancient astronomy', it is hardly plausible that Muslim metaphysics, a framework which was constructed to take that astronomy into account, remains exactly as it was before.[72]

One, however, might argue against the Soroushian theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, by posing this objection that if religious knowledge is like any other secular branches of knowledge, and therefore it is not divine, then in what sense is religious knowledge religious? The objection ended up posing this challenge, that religious knowledge so construed ceases to be religious at all.[73] Soroush's response is that what makes a branch of knowledge to bear the label of being religious is that it is primarily aimed at making sense of religion, although it always falls short of deciphering fully and thoroughly, and once and for all, what religion tells us and wants us to do. In this regard, this is just like natural sciences that are aimed at discovering the mysteries of nature, but they always fall short of discovering it fully and thoroughly and once and for all:

> since it is impossible in any period of history to say that the human sciences have been perfected, it is also impossible to say that religious knowledge has been perfected; for they are both equally human, selective, evolutionable and reconstructable.[74]

Soroush also defends the theory of contraction and expansion against those who accuse the theory

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[70] Ibid., 210ff.
[71] Soroush, much before the theory of contraction and expansion, had talked at length about the social and historical nature of natural sciences. See, for instance, this lecture of him entitle 'the historical and social identity of science', delivered in 1982 and published in *Tafarroj-i Sun': Guftarhayi dar Maqulat-i Akhlaq va San'at va Ilm-i Insani [Contemplating Creation: Essays on Ethics, Technology and Human Sciences]* (Tehran: Serat, 1996), 203–27. Later, in the theory of contraction and expansion, however, Soroush expanded his social philosophy of science applying it to 'Islamic sciences'.
[72] Soroush, *Qabz va Bast*, 227.
[73] See, e. g., Larijani, *Qabz va Bast Dar Qabz va Basti Digar [Contraction and Expansion of the Theory of Contraction and Expansion]*, 77–87.
[74] Soroush, *Qabz va Bast*, 264.

of finally lapsing into relativism.[75] Soroush begins his defence by making a division between two things: one is to say that 'everything is in a state of flux', and the other is to say that 'our understanding of everything is in a state of flux'; while the former leads to the relativity of truth, the latter does not—or so argues Soroush. He then maintains that the theory of contraction and expansion only posits the latter, and hence it is not relativistic. Put another way, while Soroush agrees that truth is immutable, he wholeheartedly argues for the position that our understanding of truths is mutable and imperfect.[76] He thinks that this position is a *sine qua none* of epistemic modesty,[77] and that this is the best theory to account for the improvement of the process of understanding.[78]

One might also pose this objection that by assuming fluidity and flexibility for the meanings of the sacred text, this theory has made them false. How could they be true if they do not convey fixed meanings? Soroush replies that the very belief that the sacred text is true paves the way for this assumption that the meanings of the text are inevitably fluid and multi-layered, and everyone will understand them to the limit of their own understanding.[79] Soroush, however, is quick to dispose a 'misreading', that the theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge does intend to support 'religious maximalism', the position shared by some believers that all true philosophical, scientific, and theological facts are implicit in the Qur'an, and they are to be discovered gradually in the course of history. But what the theory of contraction and expansion posits is that what has been said in the Qur'an can be understood in the light of new theories in a better way, rather than saying that everything is already there waiting to be discovered as religious maximalists claim.[80]

To argue for the first part of his theory (that religious knowledge is not the same thing as religion *per se*), he posits that the theory of contraction and expansion of religions knowledge is a realist theory which assumes the distinction between an object and the knowledge of an object, and the theory is not an idealist theory that sees no distinction between the mind and the world:

> The minimal condition for an epistemology to be realist is that it should distinguish between an object and knowledge of it. Our understanding of religion—even if it is correct through and through and totally flawless––is still something other than religion itself.[81]

Soroush argues that the very claim that our understanding of something—in our discussion

[75] See, e. g., Qaffari, *Naqd-i Nazariyya-yi Shari'at-i Samit [The Critique of 'Silent Shari'a"]*.
[76] Soroush, *Qabz va Bast*, 275.
[77] Ibid., 277.
[78] Ibid., 283.
[79] Ibid., 300–301.
[80] Ibid., 303.
[81] Ibid., 341.

religion—is true, if by truth the correspondence theory of truth is assumed, presupposes the distinction between reality and a conception of reality. It is because there must be something in distinction from reality that is supposed to be corresponding to reality.

The crucial outcome of the theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge is deserialization of Muslim sciences, and legitimization of unprecedented understandings of Islam. Soroush is clear about the outcome of his theory that is principally an epistemological theory rather than theological, though it has theological consequences:

> the sacredness and inalterability of religion does not require the sacredness and inalterability of religious knowledge. We arrive at nothing but an understanding of religion. No understanding of religion is sacred and uncriticizable.[82]

4.5 The Expansion of Prophetic Experience

I mentioned at the outset of this chapter that the most radical hermeneutical strategy adopted by the reformist thinkers is the 'many interpreted' strategy. I argued above, that Soroush has tried to lay the theoretical foundation of 'many interpreted' hermeneutical strategy by his theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge.

In fact Soroush has not stopped there. Despite its counter-current, idiosyncratic, and radical nature, his theory of religion's knowledge remained mainly silent about, or rather takes for granted—most probably for the sake of argument—the core of the current and 'orthodox' theory of religion, according to which religion *per se* is pure and unchangeable. His main purpose in the contraction and expansion theory of religious knowledge was to articulate and argue for a theory of religious knowledge, and not a theory of religion *per se*.

One might argue that this is the main reason why he remains silent about the core of the 'orthodox' theory of religion, or took it for granted most probably for the sake of argument.[83] The theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, as mentioned above, was initially presented between 1987 and 1989. Ten years later, to be precise between 1997 and 1999, Soroush started to publicly develop his own theory of religion, entitled by himself and known as 'the expansion of prophetic experience' theory.

Before delving into those parts of his theory of religion that are directly related to his theory of divine revelation, it would be appropriate to come up with a list containing the main points of

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[82] Ibid., 558, my translation.

[83] This judgment that Soroush, when talking about the unchangeability of religion *per se* in the contraction and expansion theory, is not talking about his own theory of religion, can be specifically supported by his comments in the introduction to the third printing of *Qabz va bast*, dated August 1994: 'this belief that 'religion is unchangeable' is what religious believers believe, and the theory of contraction and expansion is directed toward their belief. If believers one day believe that religion is changeable, then epistemology of religion will discuss this belief.' p 40. (My translation)

his overall theory of religion. The summary that Forough Jahanbakhsh (Queen's University, Canada) presents seems to me a very good way to come up with such a list:

> 1. Revelation is the same as the "religious experience" of the Prophet.
> 2. Prophetic experience expands as the Prophet's personality expands.
> 3. The Prophet's personality expands both internally (as his intellectual and spiritual capabilities evolve), and externally (as his societal life and conditions change).
> 4. Revelation is subordinate to the Prophet's personality and not vice-versa.
> 5. While the Prophet's message, the formulation of his religious experience, is final (i.e., he is the Seal of prophets according to the Qur'an), it can be infinitely expanded and enriched through the religious experiences of other believers.
> 6. Religion/scripture includes essentials as well as accidentals, i.e., not everything in the scripture is necessarily religious.
> 7. Religion/scripture provides the "necessary minimum" guidance for salvation and not the "maximum possible".
> 8. What is known as the perfection of religion is a minimal and not a maximal perfection.
> 9. Expectations from religion must be minimal.
> 10. External, rational, and historical presuppositions are at work everywhere, either to shape the formless "experience", or afterwards to facilitate the understanding and/or interpreting religion and scripture.[84]

Only the first four points are directly related to his theory of revelation. Points 5 to 9, however, are logical consequences of his theory of revelation for other parts of his overall theory of religion. Point 5 is concerned with the relation between Muhammad's religious experience and the religious experience of other believers. Points 6 to 9 are the consequences of his theory of revelation for expectations one might overall have of religion. And point 10 is the epistemological foundation upon which his whole theory of religion is reliant. Therefore, in order to delineate his theory of revelation I will only be focusing on the elaboration of the first four points in the remainder of this section, and only alluding to other points.

Soroush takes divine revelation to be the 'paradigm case of religious experience'. In the case of, for example, the command that came to Abraham to slay his innocent child, Soroush equates religious experience with a dream.[85] Moreover, phenomenologically, the nature of religious experience is filled with certitude and boldness, in such a way that prophets, unlike mystics, are not confined to their own individual experiences, but they come out with the mission to build a new world.

The centrality attached to the religious experience of prophets has a significant bearing on what it requires to follow them. While in legalistic understanding of Islam to follow Muhammad is tantamount to obeying his commands and prohibitions, in the mystical understanding to follow Muhammad is to make an effort to share the prophet's spiritual experiences, to become like a prophet. Soroush calls this mystical following of Muhammad 'mystical religiosity' as opposed to

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[84] Forough Jahanbakhsh, "Introduction," in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, ed. Forough Jahanbakhsh, trans. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), xxv–xxvi.
[85] Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, ed. Forough Jahanbakhsh, trans. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), 4.

what can be called legalistic religiosity.[86] As almost always, Soroush quotes Rumi on this point to the effect that since Muhammad ascended into the heavens, then to follow Muhammad is to strive to come forth to the Ascension: "Come forth to the Ascension, since you are of the Prophet's family."[87]

Soroush goes one step further elaborating the requirements of taking divine revelation as a kind of experience. He argues that what lies at the heart of experience is that it can be augmented, enriched, and intensified. Consequently, the prophet can gradually become more skilled in his prophethood, and become more of a prophet, just like a poet who can gradually acquire more poetical skills and become more of a poet. By drawing on Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), a North African Muslim historian, Soroush explains that the evolutionary and expandable nature of prophetic experience is not a mere possibility in the case of the prophetic experience of Muhammad, rather it is even a criterion suggested to distinguish between Meccan and Medinan suras. Meccan suras are shorter because, as Ibn Khaldun puts it, and Soroush quotes him, receiving revelation brings much pain to the receiver, and initially, Muhammad was less able to endure the pain. That is why Meccan suras are shorter. But the prophet gradually would get accustomed to the process, and then suras became longer.[88]

However, according to Soroush, the evolutionary nature of prophetic experience not only affects the form of revelation (for example the length of suras, as mentioned above) but, more importantly, it also affects the content of revelation. Since the context of Medina was different from the context of Mecca it is natural, then, that the Medinan suras are different, in terms of both form and content, from the Meccan suras. In Mecca Muhammad's task was more to shake people up, admonish and alarm them, and smash the old dogmas, especially the ones associated with idolatry. This requires the heart-catching and penetrating sermons. In Medina, however, it was time for construction and state building, that requires legislation and consolidation of the teachings. Thereby, the prophet's endurance for religious experiences grows.

Soroush, then, places huge emphasis on the dialectical relationship between the doer (Muhammad), and the deed (receiving divine revelation), or put it another way on the dialogical nature of revelatory experience of Muhammad. Bringing this dialectical and dialogical nature to its highest unfolding, he comes up with this radical conclusion that:

> look at the Prophet, whose personality *was* his capital. His personality was both the receptacle and the generator, both the subject and the object of his religious revelatory experiences. And as his personality expanded, so too did his experiences (and vice versa), such that revelation was under his sway, not he, under

[86] Ibid., 8.
[87] Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mystical Poems of Rumi*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 106.
[88] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 10.

the sway of revelation.[89]

Compared with the 'orthodox' theory of revelation, in which the prophet is portrayed as more or less the passive recipient of revelation, this theory is radical, since it places central emphasis on the prophet's own agency. To elucidate this claim in mystical terms, Soroush explains that Muhammad would become so close to God, that when he talks it is as if God talks.

Passing this radical judgment that revelation is under the personality of Muhammad's sway rather than vice versa, and depicting the prophet Muhammad's personality as both divine and at the same time historical and contingent, leads Soroush to make this counterfactual claim that: had the prophet lived longer the Qur'an would have been much longer, and probably different in terms of both content and form. Indeed, in that case there would have been a second volume of the Qur'an.

This all adds up to this position that Soroush takes to the effect that the Qur'anic revelation, which is influenced by the historical events of Muhammad's life, gradually took place in a contingent way. To illustrate this, he asks counterfactually if 'Aisha (one of Muhammad's wives) had not been accused of adultery, would we have the Qur'anic verses[90] vindicating her of the accusation?[91] For Soroush, the same counterfactual question can be asked about each and every Qur'anic verse that is taken to be related to a historical event which occurred in the time of the prophet Muhammad.

Having said that, possible different events in the time of Muhammad could have brought about different reactions to bear, while the main message of the Qur'an could remain intact. The religious experience of Muhammad, as articulated by Soroush, then, has two levels: inward and outward. Inward experience is illuminations and insights, while outward experience is political and social events which found their way into the formation of Islam in Muhammad's era. Had Muhammad lived longer the expansion of these two levels could have significantly added to the Qur'an and/or hadith.

Soroush further delineates what he considers to be the contingencies involved in the Qur'anic revelation and Sunna by appealing to the crucial contrast he makes between 'essentials' and 'accidentals' of religion. He defines 'accidentals' as religious traits, and teachings that could have been other than they historically are, unlike the essentials. Accidentals are contingencies that have found their way, in one way or another, into religion. He then comes up with a list of the accidentals of Islam. For him 'Arabic language and culture, terms, concepts, theories and

[89] Ibid., 11–12.
[90] Q. 24: 11-21.
[91] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 17.

propositions used by the prophet, historical events reflected in the Qur'an and Sunna, the questions and answers one can find in the Qur'an, and precepts of Islamic law are among the accidentals.

He then concludes that what makes Islam a religion is its essentials rather than its accidentals, adding that accidentals cannot be perpetual ways to essentials, and a Muslim is required to commit only to the essentials of Islam.[92] Soroush, however, does not allude to what might be the essentials of Islam, nor to the criterion by which one can make a distinction between the essentials and accidentals.

If the Qur'anic revelation, which is taken by Soroush to be the outcome of Muhammad's inward and outward religious experience, is depicted as historical, gradual, and contingent, then how can this be reconciled with the perfection of religion, i.e. with the Qur'anic description that 'Today I have perfected your religion for you'?[93] The response of Soroush is that the perfection promised in the verse is a 'necessary minimum of guidance', while the feasible maximum of guidance will come about gradually through the expansion that Islam will subsequently undergo.[94]

The world of experience, as Soroush explains, is inevitably pluralistic. He specifically highlights the role that Muslim mystics have played in enriching and expanding the religious experience of Muslims, which began with the religious experience of Muhammad. But Soroush is keen to show that the religious experience of Muslims has not stopped, and will not stop with the religious experience of Muhammad, and the experience of Muslims is not confined to the experience of Muhammad.

In the light of the expandability of religious experience thesis, Soroush tries to explain what he thinks to be the main cause behind the formation of numerous Muslim denominations. He argues that religions were formed through interactions and conflicts with other cultures, religions and social, intellectual and political contingencies; and they will grow accordingly. This inevitably leads to the naturally irreducible diversity of religions, including Islam, and different denominations within each religion throughout the course of history.[95]

But if, according to Soroush, the gate of religious experience is wide open and not closed with the paradigmatic experience of the prophet Muhammad, one might wonder how well it fitted with the doctrine of the finality of prophethood, that Muhammad is the last prophet in the chain of prophets, and no prophet will come after. Drawing on Muhammad Iqbal, Soroush argues that not only is the finality of prophethood not incompatible with the openness of the gate of religious experience for Muslims, but the finality doctrine encourages openness.

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[92] Soroush, Ch. 4.
[93] Q. 4: 3.
[94] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 19.
[95] Ibid., 20–21.

According to Iqbal and Soroush, the finality of prophethood implies that humanity has begun to reach a level of maturity that no longer needs another prophetic revelation for guidance. Human intellect and divine guidance in Islam and previous religions will be enough to guide Muslims. Yet another source of guidance for Muslims after the finality of prophethood, could be the cumulative force of religious experiences that Muslims keep bringing to bear. This position requires that no one's inner experience after prophet Muhammad, has the same prophetic status that can be taken as self-vindicating, rather it should critically be evaluated. As Iqbal puts it:

> The idea [of the finality of prophethood] does not mean that mystic experience, which qualitatively does not differ from the experience of the prophet, has now ceased to exist as a vital fact. [...] The intellectual value of the idea is that it tends to create an independent critical attitude towards mystic experience by generating the belief that all personal authority, claiming a supernatural origin, has come to an end in the history of man. (brackets added)[96]

Put another way, both Iqbal and Soroush think the finality of prophethood does not lead to the denial of religious experience as a never-ending source of spiritual guidance, rather it leads to the denial of any personal authority after the death of prophet Muhammad, either in the form of an Imam or spiritual master.[97]

4.6 Summary and Conclusion

It seems fair to claim, along with Jahanbakhsh, that Soroush is 'one of the most systematic architects of the Neo-Rationalist Islam'.[98] Soroushian epistemological-hermeneutical theory of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge necessitates the reconstruction of religious thought. Since religious knowledge is inevitably historically conditioned, it is necessary, especially after the rise of modernity, to reconsider the whole structure of Muslimness from the foundations of Muslim law to theology, exegesis, mysticism, philosophy, and so on.

Based on his theory of religious knowledge, then, Soroush suggests his own general theory of religion, and specifically his theory of Muslim divine prophecy, and the Qur'anic revelation. The Qur'anic revelation, according to him, is essentially a prophetic religious experience that phenomenologically involves, *inter alia*, certitude, illumination, and boldness. Like any other experiences however, it is historically conditioned, and therefore includes contingencies. Though its kernel is divine, the way divine revelation was shaped is historical. Consequently, distinguishing between the essentials, and the accidentals of religion, is a laborious and hair-splitting task left for reflective Muslims today.

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[96] Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 120–21.
[97] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, Ch. 2.
[98] Jahanbakhsh, "Introduction," xvii.

Now, after articulating Sourash's general theory of religion, including his theory of religious knowledge, I shall explain his specific theory of the Qur'anic revelation in more detail in the next chapter.

5 The Soroushian Theory of Revelation, an Exposition

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I set the stage for articulating the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation. In that chapter I explained the theoretical foundations upon which his theory of revelation seems to be based.

Now, after that stage-setting chapter, in this chapter I specifically articulate his theory of the Qur'anic revelation. I mainly argue that his theory of the Qur'anic revelation has principally gone through two different—though seemingly completing—phases. The first phase can be called 'revelation as Muhammadan speech', and the second phase can be called 'revelation as Muhammadan dream'.

5.2 Revelation as a Muhammadan Speech, the First Phase

As explained in the previous chapter, between 1997 and 1999, Soroush began to develop his own general theory of religion, after developing specifically his own epistemology of religion. It was in the articulation of his general theory of religion that he started explaining his own theory of divine revelation in terms of religious experiences. It was done especially in his Persian-language book called *bast-i tajrubi-yi nabavi* (The Expansion of Prophetic Experience).

Around ten years later, in 2007, an English translation of some of the chapters of this book were about to be published. The translation bears the title of one of his Persian books from which, *inter alia*, some chapters were translated: *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*.[1] A short interview with Soroush originally conducted in English regarding the English translation of this book marked the beginning of a new phase of his theory of revelation. The interview was done by Michel Hoebink, an Islamic studies scholar who, at that time, worked for the Arabic department of Radio Netherlands World. The original English interview was first published on Soroush's official website.[2]

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[1] The English translation contains eight chapters from *Bast-i Tajrubi-yi Nabavi* [The Expansion of Prophetic Experience] (Tehran: Sirat, 1999); two chapters from *Siratha-yi Mostaqim* [The Straight Paths] (Tehran: Serat, 1998); and one chapter from *Akhlaq-i Khudayan* [The Ethics of Gods] (Tehran: Tarh-e Nou, 2001). See: Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, xii.

[2] The interview was later published, as it was provided by Hoebink, as an appendix in the English translation of *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, pp. 271–74.

5.2.1 The Major Themes of the Interview

In this interview Soroush briefly addresses the main themes of his own theory of religion as reflected in his Persian books, especially in his two Persian books *Bast-i Tajrubi-yi Nabavi* (The Expansion of Prophetic Experience), and *Siratha-yi Mostaqim* (The Straight Paths). The main themes he discusses in this interview are:

1- Muhammad is the creator of the Qur'an rather than its passive recipient.
2- all understanding of religion is historical and fallible.
3- the Qur'an is historically and culturally conditioned, and also conditioned by Muhammad's personality and even his moods.
4- revelation is an inspirational experience akin to the mystical and poetic experiences.
5- the Qur'an, despite being divine, is limited and not absolute, since any human experience, including prophetic experience, is inherently limited.
6- Muhammad's knowledge was limited, and hence the Qur'an is fallible.
7- Soroush's theory of religion is rooted in medieval Islamic thought, especially in the Mu'tazili doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an, and also in Rumi's conception of revelation.
8- his theory of revelation makes it possible to distinguish between the essentials and accidentals of religion.
9- 'The task of Muslims today is to translate the essential message of the Koran over time.'[3]

There is almost nothing new in this interview. Soroush had already addressed almost all of these issues in his Persian books which were officially published within Iran. In the previous chapter I explained almost all of these themes. His *explicit* endorsement of the fallibility of the contents of the Qur'an in this interview, however, was new and unprecedented among even modernist reformist Muslims. This seems to be one of the most radical steps he has ever taken in his theory of religion, and probably in his whole intellectual enterprise.

Another theme which was new in this interview is his *explicit* position that the Qur'an is not the speech of God, rather it is the speech of Muhammad. It seems to be implicit in his theory of the expansion of prophetic experience as explained in his Persian books, especially *Bast-i Tajrubi-yi Nabavi*, but prior to this interview he only alluded to this position without any further explanation. Here is a telling example of this allusion: 'Let me add in passing that viewing Divine Discourse as

[3] Ibid., 275.

nothing but the Prophetic discourse is the best way of resolving the theological problems of how God speaks (*kalam-e bari*)."[4]

5.2.2 The Adventures of the Interview

As I previously mentioned, this interview marked the beginning of the first phase of his theory of the Qur'anic revelation. But it was not the original English interview that did this job, rather it was its Persian translation that played this role. The English version was published on the official website of Soroush on December 2007.[5] In January 2008 (dey 1386, Iranian hijri), a Persian translation of this interview appeared on Radio Zamaneh,[6] a Persian language media and e-learning organization based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Almost immediately it went viral and furious reactions arose against him on the part of the Iranian conservatives. The most furious reaction belonged to Hossein Noori Hamedani (b. 1926), an Iranian Shi'a *marja'-i taqlid* (lit. the source of religious emulation), who is among (probably a few) high clerics within Iran who wholeheartedly supports the Iranian regime. Referring to the interview Noori Hamedani, according to a report, said in a public talk that

> If the remarks of Soroush have been expressed with bad intentions, *Muslims should fulfil their duty*, because this person has targeted to uproot the Qur'an and Islam. The expressions of Soroush are worse than those of Salman Rushdie, [since] Salman Rushdie only insulted Muhammad (*sabb al-Nabi*) (brackets and emphasis added).[7]

Though it was not the first time that Soroush was accused of spreading 'heretical' ideas,[8] the case of Noori Hamedani's accusation of heresy was the most serious one; and up until now, it has seemingly remained so. For one thing, Noori Hamedani is a *faqih* (jurist), and *marja'*, while other accusers in previous times were not marja' but essayists, poets, intellectuals, or non-marja' clerics, or in one case a film director.

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[4] Soroush, 12. The original Persian is an edited transcript of a lecture delivered at 1997 (1376) in Tehran. For the original Persian lecture see Abdolkarim Soroush, *Bast-i Tajrubi-Yi Nabavi [The Expansion of Prophetic Experience]* (Tehran: Sirat, 1999), 1.

[5] Abdolkarim Soroush, The Word of Mohammad: An interview with Abdulkarim Soroush, interview by Michel Hoebink, December 2007, http://www.drsoroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-The%20Word%20of%20Mohammad.html.

[6] Abdolkarim Soroush, Kalam-i Muhammad: guft-u-gu ba Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush darbari Qur'an [The Word of Mohammad: An interview with Abdulkarim Soroush of the Qur'an], interview by Michel Hoebink, trans. Asef Niknam, January 2008, http://zamaaneh.com/idea/2008/01/post_236.html.

[7] Hossein Noori Hamedani, "Ayattullah Noori: Baray-i Soroush Muta'assifam [Ayattullah Noori: I am Sorry for Soroush]," *Farda News*, March 18, 2008, http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/48562.

[8] For example, more than a decade before Hamedani's semi-excommunicative announcement, Sadegh Larijani, himself a jurist but not marja', calls the ideas of Soroush, specially his epistemological theory 'one of the most dangerous theses' which 'confuses believers'. See Larijani, *Qabz va Bast Dar Qabz va Basti Digar [Contraction and Expansion of The Theory of Contraction and Expansion]*, 73 & 4.

For instance, Majid Majidi (b. 1959) a famous Iranian film director condemned Soroush's ideas regarding the fallibility of the Qur'an, as well as taking the nature of the Qur'an as being poetic. Majidi took these remarks of Soroush to be an effort to make what he called 'modern Age of Ignorance', as opposed to 'the prior Age of Ignorance'.[9] Calling Soroush 'a deviant author' (*qalam-i munharif*), Majidi asked others to break their silence condemning 'insults' done by Soroush against the prophet and the Qur'an.[10]

However, none of the previous accusations of heresy or apostasy levelled against Soroush seem to be as serious as the one levelled by Noori Hamedani against him. Since, not only did Noori Hamedani pass this judgment that Soroush's expressions are worse than Rushdie,[11] but he also said that if the intentions of Soroush behind these expressions are ascertained to be bad, then 'Muslims should fulfil their duty'. This implies the accusation of heresy and apostasy that under certain circumstances, without even asking the accused to repent, are dealt with the punishment of death.[12]

Soroush himself reacted uncompromisingly to Noori Hamedani's remarks, without mentioning his name, in his last letter to Sobhani—to be reviewed in detail below. He writes:

> [A]n ungifted faqih stands up in Qum and openly advocates murder and assassination, and says, "Muslims must do to Soroush what their duty demands", why do his peers and elders not condemn him [...]?[13]

Among those who reacted to Noor Hamedani, the case of Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari (b. 1950) is noteworthy. Eshkevari is an Iranian religious intellectual, with clerical background, who is now in self-exile in Germany. In 2000 in Iran, he was condemned to death for 'apostasy', though the sentence was later commuted to 5 years in prison, which he served.[14] Referring to his own destiny he said, 'I myself am a victim of excommunication (*takfir*)', adding that

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[9] This is an allusion to the Qur'anic verse: 'Abide in your homes and flaunt not your charms as they did flaunt them in the prior Age of Ignorance.' (33: 33) (Nasr *et al*'s translation).

[10] Majid Majidi, "Vakunish-i Majidi bi Hattaki-yi Akhir-i Soroush [Majidi's Reaction to the recent Insult of Soroush]," tabnak, March 5, 2008, http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/7469.

[11] Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) is a British novelist and essayist of Indian origin. After the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* initially published in Britain in 1988, the similarity of some characters and events in the novel with the characters and events of the early Islam, especially what was widely taken to be bitter satire regarding the prophet Muhammad, provoked uproar among some Muslims in Britain, and gradually spread elsewhere. It was fuelled by a fatwa (legal dictum) issued by Khomeini in February 1989, sentencing Rushdie to death for writing the novel. For a personal and political account of Rushdie affair, and how it transformed the relationship between Islam and the West, see Kenan Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Aftermath* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2014).

[12] It appears that Shi'a law is more severe than Sunni law, if not generally, then when it comes to the punishment of apostasy: 'The orthodox schools acknowledge the possibility of revocation and repentance (*tawbah*). The Shi'ites only do so with regard to an apostate, born an unbeliever.' Rudolph Peters and Gert J. J. De Vries, "Apostasy in Islam," *Die Welt Des Islams* 17, no. 1/4 (1976-1977): 6. That might explain why Khomeini did not accept Rushdie's apology, and issued another announcement few days after his own initial fatwa that 'Even if Salman Rushdie repents and becomes the most pious man of all time, it is incumbent on every Muslim to employ everything he has got, his life and wealth, to send him to Hell', Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1999), 284.

[13] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 321. See, also, p. 323.

[14] For Eshkevari's ideas and biography, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper, *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006).

whilst he does not share Soroush's position on revelation, Eshkevari nevertheless denounces Noori Hamedani's comments:

> This kind of talking, especially by a man who is in the position of religious authority means to issue a fatwa for death penalty and terror. Let us suppose that an ignorant guy came up and did something based on this [fatwa], what will we then gain from it? Is it beneficial to Islam, or does it retain the honor of Islam and Iran? Religious authorities should write articles criticizing Soroush rather than coming up with the accusation of excommunication (*takfir*) and fatwa for death penalty.[15]

Another noteworthy reaction on the part of conservative jurists to Soroush's interview was that of Naser Makarm Shirazi (b. 1926), another Iranian Shi'i marja'. Though his reaction was less severe than that of Noori Hamedani, the judgment of the Makarem was finally similar to Noori in taking the position that Soroush was being totally 'incompatible' with the Qur'an, and being guilty of an 'intentional or unintentional insult' to the Qur'an and the prophet Muhammad. Makarem called on Soroush to repent.[16]

I mentioned above that Yousefi Eshkevari took the remarks of Noori Hamedani as being 'a fatwa for death penalty and terror'. But is it really a fatwa? To make a better sense of juristic reactions to the ideas of Soroush it is worth dealing with this question. Thought it initially seems like a fatwa, in the last analysis, it seems not to be so. Historically, there have been two ways of a 'declaration of unbelief' (*takfir*). One has been an informal declaration of unbelief through mere protest, and the other is formal, that is usually done through legal dictum (fatwa), or through an edict of an Islamic court, to the effect that the holder of this or that opinion, or the author of this or that heretical work, forfeited his or her legal protection as a Muslim, and therefore should be killed.[17] A typical example of such a fatwa is Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie.[18] Since no excommunication fatwa has officially been issued against Soroush, nor has he been condemned in any Islamic court, one can infer that he has not been *officially* excommunicated, thought it would be apt to add that he was on the verge of excommunication.

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[15] Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, "In nu' barkhurd ba Soroush Sizavar nist [This Is not a Proper Way of dealing with Soroush]," Aftab, April 6, 2008, http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/72999.

[16] Naser Makarm Shirazi, "Pasukh-i Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi bi Abdulkarim Soroush [Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi's Response to Abdulkarim Soroush]," *Farsnews*, December 4, 2008, http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8701240237.

[17] Frank Griffel, "Excommunication," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Bowering (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). For a comprehensive and scholarly rich monograph on the phenomenon of excommunication in Muslim thought and culture, see Camilla Adang et al., eds., *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfir* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015). For an apologetic work defending Twelver Shi'ism against the accusation that it is in favour of excommunicating the majority of Muhammad's companions, Sunnis, non-Twelver branches of Shi'ism, such as Isma'ilism and Zaydism, and even in favour of excommunicating some marginal Twelver Shi'i groups, such as Akhbaris and Sheikhis, see Abu Muhammad Sa'idi, *Nafy Zahirat Takfir 'inda Shi'a al-Imamiyya [Twelver Shi'ism against the Phenomenon of Excommunication]* (Tehran: Mash'ar, 2012).

[18] See above, footnotes 11 & 12.

Moreover, despite the dismissive and semi-takfiri approach of Noori Hamedani and Makarem Shirazi, two other maraji' (plural form of marja') got engaged in a detailed criticism of Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation, without taking a takfiri approach. Hussein-Ali Montazeri[19] (1922 –2009) wrote two responses, the first of which was relatively short,[20] but the second one was a detailed and point-by-point response.[21] At the beginning of his second response, which was after Noori Hamedani's and Makarem Shirazi's semi-takfiri comments about Soroush, Montazeri wrote:

> The only way for arriving at and communicating speculative truths is to engage in scholarly debates free from political motivations and avoid indicting one another (*tafsiq*), accusing each other of blasphemy or heresy (*takfir*) and respect the dignity of writing (*hurmat-i qalam*) and character of each other.[22]

More importantly, more than a month after the publication of the Persian translation of this interview, in February 2008 (Esfand 1386, Iranian Hijri), Ja'far Sobhani (b. 1929), another Iranian Shi'i marja' wrote an article criticizing Soroush's ideas on divine revelation, and even blaming Soroush for his idiosyncratic thoughts, though without taking a takfiri approach. Soroush responded to Sobhani. This was accompanied with yet another response from Sobhani. It was again responded to by Soroush.

Criticisms of Sobhani, for two reasons, turned out to be politically more important than those made by Montazeri—though both criticisms have a lot in common. The first reason is that Soroush directly responded to Sobhani's criticisms, while he did not do so with regard to Montazeri's. The second is that Montazeri has been widely regarded as a reformist jurist who, despite his prominent role in the 1979 Revolution and its aftermath, gradually appeared as a dissident, that resulted in his being dismissed as Khomeini's designate heir. After the death of Khomeini in 1989, Montazeri continued expressing his political dissent, this time against the new religious and political leader of Iran 'Ali Khamenei (b. 1939), that led to Montazeri's house arrest for more than five years from 1997 to 2003.

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[19] A scholarly monograph in English detailing Montazeri's biography, his religious and political thoughts, and legacy is yet to be written. For a brief biographical account of Montazeri, sketching his 'transformation from revolutionary mullah to revolutionary dissident', accompanied with an interesting interview with him in English, see Geneive Abdo, "Re-Thinking the Islamic Republic: A 'conversation' with Ayatollah Hossein 'Ali Montazeri,"' *The Middle East Journal* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 9–24. The best source in Persian is Montazeri's own memoirs Hosseinali Montazeri, *khaterat Ayatollah Hosseinali Montazeri [Montazeri Diaries]* (Ketab corp, 2001).

[20] Hussein-Ali Montazeri, "Pasukh-i Ayatullah Montazeri bi Pursishhayi Piramun-i Nazariyyi-yi 'Qur'an wa wahy' [The Response of the Grand Ayatullah Montazeri to the Questions Regarding 'the Quran and Revelation,"' 2008, http://www.drsoroush.com/Persian/On_DrSoroush/P-CMO-13870202-Montazeri.html.

[21] Hussein-Ali Montazeri, "Safir-i Haq Wa Safir-i Wahy [The Ambassador of Truth and the Whistle of Revelation]," 2009, http://www.drsoroush.com/Persian/On_DrSoroush/P-CMO-13871105-Montazeri2.html.

[22] Ibid. I am grateful to Daryoush Mohammadpour for kindly editing my translation.

Moreover, Montazeri also distanced himself from the theory of 'the absolute guardianship of the jurist' (*vilayat-i mutlaqi-yi faqih*) defending instead the theory of the elective and conditional guardianship of the jurist, a theory that is far from the statecraft model being implemented in Iran after 1979 till now.[23] All these factors contributed to him being considered as a 'gadfly outsider' in the eye of revolutionaries. That is why Montazeri's advice against taking a takfiri approach might not have considerable influence on the revolutionary clerics.

Sobhani, like Montazeri, was a pupil of Khomeini. Unlike Montazeri, however, he never turned against his mentor, or his successor. Though not as politically influential as Montazeri, Sobhani remained faithful to the revolutionary clerics.[24] In his responses Sobhani never explicitly condemned the semi-takfiri approach of Noori Hamedani and Makarem Shirazi, but his very engagement in a series of critical dialogues with Soroush without indicting and accusing him, at least explicitly, of blasphemy and heresy, eventually contributed both to the development of Soroushian theory of revelation, and also to Soroush not being, at least officially, excommunicated. Other critiques have also been levelled against the theory,[25] but due to the significance of Sobhani's criticisms in developing the Soroushian theory of revelation, his criticisms, and Soroush's responses to him will be sketched out in the section that follows.

5.2.3 Soroush-Sobhani's Dialogues

5.2.3.1 The Background of Soroush-Sobhani's Dialogues

It was not the first time that Sobhani had been engaged in a public critical discussion with Soroush. In summer 2005, Soroush delivered a lecture in Paris in which he criticized what he considered to be an 'extremist' (*ghali*) version of Shi'ism. In this version of Shi'ism, according to Souroush, certain privileges that Muslims exclusively reserved for the prophet Muhammad, such as legislation (*tashri'*), have been attributed to Shi'i Imams. This makes Shi'ism, according to Soroush, incompatible with the doctrine of the finality of prophethood (*khatamiyyat*), that no prophet will come after the prophet Muhammad. Soroush also argued that 'Mahdism' (*mahdaviyyat*), i.e. believing in the

[23] For more on political theology of Montazeri, see Naser Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47ff.
[24] For a biography of Sobhani, see "Zindiginami-yi Hazrat-i Ayatollah Sobhani [Ayatollah Sobhani's Biography]," *Hawzah*, 2006, http://www.hawzah.net/fa/article/view/3173.
[25] An Arabic translation of the Hoebink interview with Soroush accompanied by Sobhani's critiques and Soroush's responses, and that of Montazeri's, Makaerm Shirazi's critiques, and by a number of other clerics and lay critics have been published. The last article of this collection, written by an Iranian reformist mid-ranking cleric Muhammad Nasr Esfahani, argues that Soroush is not right in his theory of revelation, but he is not to be excommunicated. See Abdolkarim Soroush et al., *Hiwarat Ma'a 'AbdolKarim Soroush [Dialogues with 'AbdolKarim Soroush]* (Kuwait: Majallat Nusus Mu'asira, 2013).

prophesied redeemer or Messiah of Islam called Mahdi, who will appear, and rule the world a few years prior to the day of judgment, is not compatible with a democratic governance.[26]

The publication of a report of Soroush's lecture gave rise to some theological controversies, and Soroush engaged in a written back-and-forth debate with Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour, a Shi'a mid-ranking cleric based in London. Sobhani finally joined the debate by writing an open letter, arguing that the Shi'i doctrine of Imamate is not only fully compatible with the doctrine of the finality of prophethood, but Imamate is the key to the preservation of 'true' Islam. Sobhani did not respond to the objection of the incompatibility of Mahdism and democracy.[27]

5.2.3.2 Sobhani's First New Letter to Soroush

Three years later in February 2008 Sobhani, once again, wrote an open letter critiquing Soroush after the publication of the above-mentioned interview. This marked the beginning of a series of back-and-forth written debates between a high-ranking religious authority based in Qum, and a lay scholar with controversial ideas who was close to be excommunicated, and who has long been in a self-imposed exile mainly in America. This seems a unique chapter in the intellectual history of contemporary Islam in general, and especially in post-revolutionary Iranian Twelver Shi'i Islam. Due to these reasons, and also due to its close relevance to the development of the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation, these dialogues are worth special attention.

At the beginning of the first letter, Sobhani by referring to his previous open letter expresses disappointment and sorrow to see that his letter has not been effective, and Soroush has gone even further in what Sobhani takes to be not only 'undermining' Shi'ism, but this time Islam as a whole:

> Dr Soroush, in his previous discussion (on the subject of the Imamate and caliphate), was unkind to the Shi'i Imams, but here he has gone a step further being unkind to the realm of revelation and the Qur'an.[28]

Sobhani then argues that an effort to account for the prophetic revelation in terms of Muhammad's own inner life, is an accusation made against Muhammad initially by Meccan polytheists. It is also, he goes on to say, an Orientalist position not taken by even a single Muslim, and is totally foreign to Islamic theology.[29]

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[26] For an sketch of Mahdism in Twelver Shi'ism, see: Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980).

[27] A report of Soroush's lecture in Paris as well as his debates with Bahmanpour and also Sobhani's critique of Soroush have been collected in this book Abdolkarim Soroush, Jafar Sobhani, and Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour, *Khatamiyyat va Vilayat [the Doctrine of Finality and Religious Authority]* (Tehran: Sampad, 2010).

[28] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 278. All four back-and-forth open letters, two of which are from Sobhani's side, and the other two from Soroush's side, have been translated into English, and published in this book as appendices two to five.

[29] Ibid., 279–81.

Sobhani also further criticizes Soroush of not being consistent in his position. According to Sobhani, Soroush on the one hand says in the interview that 'revelation is higher poetry'.[30] This implies that both form and content of the Qur'an belong to Muhammad. Sobhani argues that the Qur'an depicts divine revelation as being irrelevant to poetry, and Muhammad as not being a poet. Sobhani quotes this Qur'anic verse to back his claim: 'We have not taught the Prophet poetry, nor could he ever have been a poet'.[31] Having likened the Qur'anic revelation to poetry, Soroush, however, further in the interview says that what the prophet receives from God, is the content of revelation which is formless, and in order to make it accessible Muhammad himself forms the formless. Sobhani then puts the consistency of the theory under question: 'there, everything was from the Prophet, except for a weak link with God. But, here, the formless meanings are from God and the form is from the Prophet!'[32]

In addition to the inner inconsistency objection, Sobhani makes an outer inconsistency objection, that is the inconsistency of Soroushian theory of revelation, with what Sobhani takes to be the clear position of the Qur'an. Sobhani lists a number of Qur'anic verses attesting to this theory of revelation that both form and content of the Qur'an are from God. One example is when Muhammad is addressed in an imperative form in the Qur'an as to what to say and do, such as 'Say, 'He is God the One'.[33] Sobhani argues that taking the Qur'an as a human book does not square with hundreds of the Qur'anic verses.[34] One more example he makes is this famous verse: 'he [Muhammad] does not speak from his own desire. The Qur'an is nothing less than a revelation that is sent to him.'[35]

This is actually the general strategy of Sobhani in critiquing Soroush. Sobhani tries to show that the Soroushian theory of revelation is either internally inconsistent, or incompatible with the Qur'an, or both. Regarding the position of Soroush as to the fallibility of the prophet, and his limited knowledge in non-religious issues, once again, Sobhani endeavours to show that it is in contradiction with the Qur'an's self-image, or tradition (in the comprehensive Shi'i term that includes sayings and doings of Shi'i Imams).[36]

Moreover, Sobhani argues that Soroush has misrepresented the Mu'tazili position, in order to create this impression that the latter position is similar to that of Mu'tazilis. Soroush argues that his theory of revelation is rooted in medieval Muslim thought, especially in the Mu'tazili doctrine

[30] Ibid., 272.
[31] Q. 36: 69.
[32] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 282.
[33] Q. 112: 1.
[34] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 283.
[35] Q. 53: 3-5.
[36] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 284–5.

of the createdness of the Qur'an. But Sobhani argues that 'if they [Mu'tazilis] said that it [the Qur'an] was created, they meant that it was created by God, not a product of the Prophet's thinking' (brackets added).[37]

At the end of his first letter, Sobhani reacts to the advice that Soroush gives to the effect that the essentials of the Qur'an should be translated over time. Sobhani says '[b]y presenting the Qur'an as a fallible human book, you have distanced yourself from the Islamic community; there is no further need for your advice.'[38]

5.2.3.3 The First Response of Soroush to Sobhani

Only one month later, in February 2008, Soroush published his first detailed response to Sobhani. Soroush first reformulates his theory, and then responds one by one to Sobhani's objections. He articulates that God's speech bears no other plausible meaning, but that God's prophets are close to God in such a degree that their words are taken, from a believers' point of view, as God's words. Otherwise, in the literal sense of the term, God has no speech.

Soroush then uses an analogy to show that from a theistic point of view, his position is not to be taken as a strange view. We usually say that the cherry is the fruit of the cherry tree, and it is not to be taken as being at odds with the theistic view, according to which each and every event in the world happens by God's knowledge, will, and permission. As we do not need to negate the cherry being the fruit of the cherry tree, to remain true to theistic perspective, by the same token we do not need to negate Muhammad's key role in the formation of the Qur'anic revelation in order to remain true to the position that the Qur'an is divine revelation. He calls this process of the prophet's closeness to God, and the prophet's word being considered as God's words as, 'the absorption of the contingent in the Necessary'.[39]

As to the Soroushian position that the Qur'anic revelation is like higher poetry, and Sobhani's objection to it that it is the accusation levelled against the Qur'an by Muhammad's opponents as reflected in the Qur'an, Soroush responds that what people understand today by poetry, which is 'elevated artistic creativity' is very different from what contemporary opponents of Muhammad had of it.[40] Referring, as almost always, to Rumi, Soroush makes it explicit that Gabriel is to be taken as a 'one of the gradations of human beings', and the mechanism of revelation as the secret whispering of one layer of multi-layered human being into the ears of another layer:

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[37] Ibid., 285. I will address the relationship between the Soroushian theory of revelation and that of Mu'tazilis in the next chapter.
[38] Ibid., 286.
[39] Ibid., 290.
[40] Ibid., 293.

The Gabriel will tell you the rest,
nay it is you who's whispering in your own ear
It's neither an I, nor an other, but a you who are I
Like times when you sink into sleep
from within yourself you appear before yourself
When you hear something from yourself, you imagine
someone else has told you a secret in your sleep
You're not uni-layered, my good friend
You're the oceans' deep and the universe.[41]

Soroush concludes that 'the Prophet's higher self speaks to his lower self', albeit, he is quick to add, with God's permission and will.[42]

Soroush then responds to Sobhani's objection to the effect that taking the Qur'anic revelation to be human and divine, rather than only divine, would end up taking it as being based on idle passion. Soroush argues in response that even if we assume that the Qur'an is only thoroughly human, would not necessarily render it as being based on idle passion (the example being the works of great philosophers), let alone taking it, as Soroush does, as being both thoroughly human, *and* thoroughly divine.[43]

Soroush then rejects the accusation usually levelled against him that his theory of revelation leads to the denial of God's speech. His theory, he claims, is a theory of God's speech rather than its denial: 'I am not saying: God does not speak; I am saying: In order for God to speak, a Prophet speaks and his words are considered to be God's words.'[44] According to Soroush, the result is that, the formless meaning is from God, since God Himself is formless, and God pours his absolute being into the limited jug of Muhammad, and it becomes Muhammadan speech of God, rather than being meta-historical and meta-human speech.[45]

Muhammad was from Hijaz, then the Qur'an has been coloured in a Hijazi way (a specific 'Arabic dialect, customs and so on): 'He lives in Hijaz amid tent-dwellers, so paradise, too, occasionally, appears as if it has been designed for Arabs and tent-dwellers, with black-eyed women

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[41] Ibid., 293. Masnavi, book three, verses 1298-302. It is to be mentioned that the English translation of verses seems to be that of the translator (i.e. N. Mobasser), and in any way, it is not that of Nicholson. Nicholson's translation is as follows: "Another thing remains (to be said), but the Holy Spirit will tell thee the tale of it, without me. Nay, thou wilt tell it even to thine own ear—neither I nor another than I (will tell it thee), O thou that art even I— Just as, when thou fallest asleep, thou goest from the presence of thyself into the presence of thyself: Thou hearest from thyself, and deemest that such or such a one has secretly told thee in the dream that (which thou hast heard). Thou art not a single "thou," O good comrade; nay, thou art the sky and the deep sea". Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, vol. IV (London: Luzac, 1930), 73.
[42] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 293.
[43] Ibid., 294.
[44] Ibid., 295.
[45] The idea of 'form' versus 'formless', and God being formless out of which all forms come forth is a mystical theme. Soroush has been, specifically, influenced by the Rumi's treatment of this theme and he frequently refers to this verse from Rumi: 'The form came forth from Formlessness and went back (thither), for Verily unto Him are we returning.' Mathnavi, 1: 1141.

who are sitting in tents.'[46] The Qur'an's eloquence, which, Soroush says, is not always high, keeps following Muhammad's changing moods. Soroush then once again emphatically states that 'revelation and Gabriel complied with the Prophet's personality'.[47]

Soroush, then, argues that his theory of revelation is not alien to or disconnected from the history of Muslim philosophical, and theological traditions. Though without any reference or any details, Soroush mentions, *inter alia*, al-Farabi, and the way for al-Farabi imagination plays a role in revelation.[48] Soroush also refers to Rumi, and specifically how for Rumi the prophet, in the process of revelation, forms what is formless. A rather famous line of poetry by Rumi has been quoted by Soroush's critics, to show that even Rumi does not support the Soroushian theory of revelation, but Rumi even takes such a theory as blasphemous. Rumi's verse reads 'although the Qurʾan came to us from the Prophet's lips / anyone who says it wasn't said by God blasphemes'.[49] Majid Majidi was one of those who quoted this verse against Soroush, arguing that according to Rumi, who is the mentor (*murad*) for Soroush, Soroush is an 'infidel' (*kafir*).[50] Soroush, however, interprets this verse in a different way, he says that with the Qur'an being from the prophet's lips, it means that Muhammad's persona is pivotal in shaping the Qur'an, and of course since Muhammad is a 'God-nurtured persona', then the Qur'an is, in a sense, from God.[51]

Soroush believes that every event occurring in the world has natural cause(s), and revelatory events are not an exception to this rule. Here again, in order to justify his claim, and also to show that his position is in line with Muslim philosophical traditions, he appeals to a principle first developed among Muslim philosophers by Ibn Sina,[52] and later by Mulla Sadra Shirazi (c. 1571/2 – 1640).[53] This principle sets out that every originated or emergent (*hadith*),[54] or accident (*'arad*) being, is preceded by material potentiality and time (*kull-u hadith-in masbuq-un bi maddat-in wa mudda*). This means every 'temporal originated being' (*hadith zamani*), i.e. what happens within time, needs to actualize its potentialities. In order to actualize its potentialities, however, some material requirements are to be already actualized.[55] Since for Soroush revelation,

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[46] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 295. This is an allusion to the Qur'an 44: 54 and 52: 20, where the Qur'an depicts the beauty of a heavenly wife as involving 'large, dark eyes' (*hur al-'ayn*).
[47] Ibid., 296.
[48] For an articulation of al-Farabi's theory of revelation, see Chapter 3.
[49] *Masnavi*, book four, verse 2122. The Nicholson's translation is: 'Though the Qur'an is (dictated) from the lips of the Prophet —if any one says God did not speak it, he is an infidel.' Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, IV: 389.
[50] Majidi, "Vakunish-i Majidi bi Hattaki-yi Akhir-i Soroush [Majidi's Reaction to the recent Insult of Soroush]."
[51] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 296.
[52] Gholam Hossein Ibrahimi Dinani, *Qava'id-i Kulli-Yi Falsafi Dar Falsafi-Yi Islami [General Philosophical Principles in Islamic Philosophy]*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Institute for Humanities & Cultural Studies, 2002), 176.
[53] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 296.
[54] Hadith, with long 'a' and short 'i', which means originated or emergent, is not to be confused with hadith, with short 'a' and long 'i', which means report.
[55] For Ibn Sina's articulation of this principle and his defence, see Ibn Sina, *Al-Najat fi al-Mantiq wa aI-Ilahiyyat [The Book of Salvation on Logic and Theology]*, ed. 'Abd al-Rahman 'Umayara, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Jayl, 1992), 71–73. For Mulla

though in a sense divine, is an accident and a temporal event, originated like other events in history, then the principle is to be applied in this case, and consequently revelation requires a natural explanation. Soroush concludes that 'what Muhammad brought into play were his own limitations in existential and historical terms, in terms of his learning and his character, and so on and so forth; limitations that no being can avoid or escape.'[56]

Soroush then argues that the idea that Muhammad as the prophet of God is not supposed to know everything, or be totally immune to error, is already suggested by some Muslim philosophers, theologians, exegetes, and mystics such as Ibn Khaldun and Ibn 'Arabi. He also refers, *inter alia*, to the Qur'anic verses such as 'God … taught you what you did not know',[57] and 'Lord, increase me in knowledge!'[58] to argue that prophets are not depicted in the Qur'an as knowing everything.[59] He argues that limited knowledge would cause prophets to err. For example, as the Qur'an reports, Abraham made a mistake when he was frightened of his guests who turned out to be angels who had brought good tidings for him, while Abraham did not initially recognize them as such.[60]

Soroush then defends the incongruity between at least some interpretations of the Qur'an, and human learnings, especially scientific or philosophical learnings. His argument is that once we recognize the possibility of a non-literal interpretation of the Qur'an in order to solve the incongruity, we have thereby recognized the incongruity of one or another interpretation of the Qur'an with human learnings: 'In fact, non-literal interpretation is nothing more than an attempt to replace one bit of human learning with another.'[61] Soroush then illustrates his position with some examples of modern, and pre-modern exegetes, such as Jar Allah Zamakhshari (1075-1144) a Mu'tazili exegete and linguist of Persian origin, Mahmud al-Alusi (1802-1854) an Iraqi jurist and exegete, Mohammad Hossein Tabatab'i (1903- 1981), and Mahmoud Taleqhani (1911-1979). All these exegetes deal with the alleged incongruities between one or another interpretation of the Qur'an, and the scientific and philosophical theories they accepted. Soroush concludes that these contractions and expansions inevitably lie at the heart of the hermeneutical exegesis in general. From listing, and alluding to Muslim exegetes, Soroush has the intention in mind to argue that

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Sadra's formulation and defense of this principle see Al-Shirazi Mulla Sadra, *Al-Ḥikmat al-Muta'āliya fi al-Asfār al-'Aqliyya al-Arba'a [The Transcendent Theosophy in the Four Journeys of the Intellect]*, ed. Muḥammad Husayn Tabataba'i, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al- 'Arabi, 1990), 49–56.

[56] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 296.

[57] Q. 4: 113.

[58] Q. 20: 114.

[59] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 297.

[60] Q. 15: 52. For the short summary of the way exegetes interpret the reason why Abraham was frightened of his guests, see Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 649.

[61] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 298.

unlike what Sobhani claims, the position developed by Soroush is not an invention of the orientalists, but is a position well rooted in at least a part of Muslim intellectual heritage.

Soroush then responds to this Sobhani's objection that Soroush has become an outsider, and we, Muslims, do not need to seek advice from outsiders. Soroush's response is that by the same token, a number of prominent Muslim exegetes such as al-Zamakhshari, and Tabatab'i (the latter was the mentor of Sobhani himself), should be considered as outsiders, because they also took similar positions as to the incongruities between some Qur'anic interpretations, and some human learning. Soroush then warns that adopting such an insider-outsider rhetoric would 'call on critical believers to turn into uncritical imitators'.[62]

5.2.3.4 Sobhani's Second Response to Soroush

Around one month later, in March 2008, Sobhani published his second response to Soroush. He, once again, dwells on this common critique that the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation does not square with the Qur'an's self-image of divine revelation. He enumerates a number of the Qur'anic verses,[63] amongst which he puts emphasis on this verse: 'If it [the Qur'an] had been from anyone other than God, they would have found much inconsistency in it' (brackets added).[64] Sobhani also highlights this verse:

> [Prophet!], do not rush your tongue in an attempt to hasten the Revelation: We shall make sure of its safe collection and recitation. When We have recited it, repeat the recitation and We shall make it clear.[65]

Sobhani argues that the only way to explain the commands and prohibitions directed towards Muhammad in the Qur'an is to take the Qur'an, both in its form and content, to be entirely divine. More specifically, the command not to hasten in reciting the Qur'an can only be accounted for when the Qur'an is the verbal revelation of God. Sobhani argues that Soroush by considering mystical religious experience as complementary to, and expansion of the prophet's religious experience, removes the necessary boundary between prophetic revelation and mystical experience.[66]

Soroush had already critiqued Sobhani on the mechanistic conception of revelation that Sobhani, according to Soroush, adopts. In this conception, as Soroush depicts, God is described as a speaker, and Muhammad as merely a loudspeaker echoing what God intends to convey. In this

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[62] Ibid., 301.
[63] Ibid., 305.
[64] Q. 4: 82.
[65] Q. 75: 16-19.
[66] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 306.

conception, Muhammad is nothing but a passive means to an end.[67] Sobhani, however, denies the imagery of the loudspeaker, arguing that Muhammad is a receiver of a message rather than merely a loudspeaker, and for a prophet to be able to receive God's message, he has to reach a high level of spiritual and moral perfection, and thereby the prophet is not like a passive loudspeaker.[68]

To further argue that the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation does not fit at all with the Qur'anic self-image of divine revelation, Sobhani appeals, *inter alia*, to this verse:

> Many a time We have seen you [Prophet] turn your face towards Heaven, so We are turning you towards a prayer direction that pleases you. Turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque: wherever you [believers] may be, turn your faces to it.[69]

The verse is taken unanimously by commentators as referring to the story of the change of *qibla* (direction of prayer). The Prophet and believers in the Meccan period at the first year of the immigration to Medina used to pray toward Jerusalem. As Jews reproached Muhammad for praying toward the same direction as they did, Muhammad turned his face toward heaven hoping for a change in qibla, and hence the verse was revealed.[70] Sobhani takes Muhammad's waiting for God's revelation as showing that Muhammad is the recipient of revelation, rather than its originator, since waiting for revelation would not make sense if Muhammad were the originator of revelation.[71]

Sobhani then responds to Soroush's view that Muhammad as the prophet of God is not supposed to be all knowing and infallible. Without addressing and reinterpreting the Qur'anic verses to which Soroush appealed to back his view, Sobhani lists other Qur'anic verses that, according to his interpretation, show that Muhammad's knowledge of even natural sciences cannot be confined to the knowledge level of his era. Sobhani specifically refers to a verse describing the different stages of the physical growth of human beings in their mothers' wombs.[72] Referring to the 'Qur'an's scientific miracle' Sobhani, then, asks 'Did the Arabs of the age of ignorance know about this kind of creation?'.[73] In this way, he tries to show that due to the Qur'an being a 'scientific miracle', the Qur'anic revelation cannot be explained as the outcome of Muhammad's own religious experience.

As to the principle that every originated or emergent or accident being is preceded by material potentiality and time, Sobhani very briefly states that this principle is only applicable to 'the material creations', and is not pertinent to 'the incorporeal beings' such as divine revelation.[74]

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[67] Ibid., 294.
[68] Ibid., 308.
[69] Q. 2: 144.
[70] For more on this see Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 65.
[71] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 308.
[72] Q. 23: 14.
[73] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 312.
[74] Ibid., 312–13.

Sobhani then makes a rejoinder to Soroush on the incongruity between one or another interpretation of the Qur'an and human learning, especially scientific or philosophical findings. Sobhani's rejoinder is that the incongruity occurs only between a human understanding of the Qur'an, which is fallible, and scientific theories that are fallible too, and therefore 'basically, there cannot be the slightest conflict between science and unerring revelation.'[75]

5.2.3.5 The Second Response of Soroush to Sobhani

Two months later, in May 2008, Soroush wrote his second response to Sobhani. This marked the last chain of open letters exchanged between Soroush and Sobhani, as Sobhani did not respond to Soroush's last letter. First, Soroush argues that his theory of revelation does not deny these doctrines that: the Qur'an was sent down to Muhammad's heart, that Gabriel was the angel responsible for bearing the verses, that the Qur'an is the speech of God, that the imperative form *qol* 'say' is numerously mentioned in the Qur'an, that, on some occasions, revelation of the verses was delayed, and that the Prophet waited for receiving them, that the Prophet was ordered by God not to rush in reciting the Qurʾan, that any alteration to the verses was not allowed for the prophet, that what people have received is the word of God, and that the Qurʾan is an extraordinary and miraculous book, and so on.

His main argument, instead, is to come up with a natural explanation of a phenomenon such as revelation, with all its characteristics, that does not necessarily conflict, but could be fully compatible, with its theistic explanation, since these two explanations do not refer to the same level of reality. To illustrate this, Soroush draws on some of the Qur'anic verses in which both natural and theistic explanations are woven together: 'Did We not send water pouring down from the clouds?'[76] Here, Soroush argues, rain is attributed both to clouds (natural explanation), and to God (theistic explanation). Soroush takes this as a general principle arguing that as the natural explanation of the phenomenon of rain does not tie God's hands, and force Him/Her/It off the stage, the same can be said, without any difference, about the natural explanation of the phenomenon of divine revelation:

> Does everything that occurs in nature not have natural causes? So, why should the revelation received by the Prophet be an exception to this rule? Why does nature have to be bypassed and revelation attributed directly to the supernatural?[77]

[75] Ibid., 313.
[76] Q. 78: 14.
[77] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 325.

Soroush, then, responds to Sobhani's objection that taking the Qur'an to be the outcome of Muhammad's religious experience makes it arbitrary, and within the control of the prophet, despite the fact that Muhammad would sometimes wait to receive a revelation, which implies that revelation is not in his control. In response, Soroush argues that prophethood aside, even other kinds of human discoveries such as philosophical, scientific, and mathematical discoveries are not arbitrary in the sense that the discoverer can do whatever he/she wants with his/her discovery. Composing poetry follows the same rule, it is not the case that a good poet can versify whenever he/she wants. Rather, he/she must wait for a time when poems, so to speak, emanate from him/her.

Soroush then addresses the objection that the Qur'anic commands and prohibitions, specifically the order form *qul* (say), can only be accounted for if the nature of divine revelation would be taken as the verbal revelation of God. The rejoinder Soroush came up with was that all instances of 'say' in the Qur'an are 'a rhetorical technique that the speaker sometimes addresses himself, although, in fact, his audience are other people.'[78] Mentioning some of Rumi's poems in which the imperative form 'say' play the same rhetorical rule, Soroush then mentions a Qur'anic verse that, at least from what he calls 'Islamic orthodox' point of view, cannot be plausibly explained unless the Qur'anic imperative 'ask' in this verse is interpreted as a rhetorical technique, which is actually addressed not to the prophet himself, but to others: 'So if you [Prophet] are in doubt about what We have revealed to you, ask those who have been reading the scriptures before you.'[79] Soroush argues that at least from the 'orthodox' point of view, Muhammad could not have doubted his own prophethood, 'ask' in this verse, hence, should be interpreted as actually addressing not Muhammad, but others who were in doubt.[80]

Soroush then explains how his theory of the Qur'anic revelation can, in a sense, be compatible with taking the Qur'an to be miracle or inimitable. He argues that 'Miraculous was Muhammad, thus miraculous became his book'.[81] Producing a book like the Qur'an from a person like Plato is not miraculous, but from an 'illiterate orphan' like Muhammad, in a dark age like the Seventh Century, in the Arabian Peninsula is a miracle—or so thinks Soroush. Again, to show that his position is not detached from the exegetical tradition of the Qur'an, he refers to some prominent Sunni and Shi'i exegetes who take this verse, 'If you have doubts about the revelation

[78] Ibid., 327.
[79] Q. 10: 94.
[80] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 327.
[81] Ibid., 328.

We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single sura like it',[82] as meaning, amongst other possibilities, to produce a sura *from a person like Muhammad*.[83]

Related to the above point regarding the inimitability, and the miraculous nature of the Qur'an, Soroush very briefly alludes to the idea of *sarfa* (the divine act of preventing others to produce something like the Qur'an), to show that for Muslim theologians and exegetes it has not always been historically the case that only the content of the Qur'an is miraculous: 'It was also in this context that some eminent Muʿtazilite and Shiʿi figures were of the view that book similar to the Qurʾan could be produced by others but that God does not let it happen.'[84]

Sarfa is a theory of the Qur'anic *i'jaz* (inimitability), attributed for the first time to the Mu'tazili Ibrahim Nazzam. According to Nazzam bringing a sura like the Qur'an in terms of eloquence is possible, but God would prevent others from producing something like it. In this sense, Qur'anic eloquence, while in principle is imitable, in practice is inimitable. The theory found some acceptance among some Baghdadi Mu'tazila, and some Imami Shi'is.[85]

Soroush, then, once again puts emphasis on his uncompromising theological position that 'the attribution of speech to God, like the attributions of other human characteristics to Him, is to be taken metaphorically. They are not anthropomorphical.'[86] Soroush lists a number of anthropomorphical attributes of God in the Qur'an, such as 'walking',[87] 'getting angry',[88] and 'sitting on a throne',[89] claiming that as these attributes are to be taken metaphorically, the same is to be done when speech is attributed to God in the Qur'an.[90]

Referring to the sura 16, verses 68 and 69, Soroush argues that revelation to the bee and to the prophets are in principle the same: 'God wrote Muhammad and Muhammad wrote the Qurʾan, just as God created the bee and the bee produced honey. And honey was the product of revelation.'[91] The above-mentioned verses read:

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[82] Q. 2: 23.
[83] The accurate references to commentators, which are not made in the English edited translation of *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, are: Muhsin Fayz Kashani, *Tafsir Al-Safi*, ed. Hussein A'lami, vol. 1 (Tehran: Sadr, 2010), 1: 102. Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, vol. 1 (Beirut: A'lami, 1997), 1: 61. Al-Razi, *Tafsir Al-Fakhr al-Razi*, 2: 129.
[84] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 328–29.
[85] Richard C. Martin, "Inimitability," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2002), 532. Richard C. Martin, Mark Woodward, and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazililism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (London: Oneworld, 1997), 79–80. For an Imami Shi'i endorsement of *sarfa*, see Martin J. McDermott, *The Theology of Al-Shaikh al-Mufid* (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1978), 387.
[86] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 329.
[87] Q. 25: 23.
[88] Q. 43: 55.
[89] Q. 20: 5.
[90] Such as 'To Moses God spoke directly', Q. 4: 164.
[91] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 329.

> And your Lord revealed unto (*awha*) the bee, saying, 'Build yourselves houses in the mountains and trees and what people construct. Then feed on all kinds of fruit and follow the ways made easy for you by your Lord.' From their bellies comes a drink of different colours in which there is healing for people. There truly is a sign in this for those who think.[92]

To account for the Qur'anic divine revelation, Soroush contrasts the metaphor of the bee with the metaphor of the parrot. He takes the metaphor of the bee from the Qur'an, but the parrot metaphor is not Qur'anic. Soroush argues that as the biological structure of the process of honey-making in the bee is depicted in the Qur'an as the outcome of divine revelation, and at the same time there is no difficulty in saying that in this process the bee is actively involved, the same can be said about the Qur'an. As the honey is produced by the bee, and at the same time it is, according to the Qur'anic portrayal, the outcome of divine revelation, then the Qur'an is the outcome of Muhammad's mentality, and at the same time the outcome of divine revelation, without the former contradicting the latter. Soroush further argues that the parrot model of revelation, according to which Muhammad is a passive recipient of revelation is not a defensible model.

Soroush, then, refers to Mulla Sadra. Here is his direct quotation from Mulla Sadra:

> Do not ever imagine that the Prophet heard the word of God from Gabriel in the same way that you hear the word of the Prophet. And do not ever imagine that the Prophet imitated Gabriel in the same way that Islamic nation imitates the Prophet. Immense indeed is the distance between the two! They are two distinct species. Imitation is never authentic knowledge and true cognisance.[93]

Soroush argues that, except for literalist theologians, all Muslim philosophers have considered 'it impossible for the Prophet to grasp revelation without the involvement of his faculty of imagination.'[94] And at least for Soroush, if not for all Muslim philosophers to whom he sympathetically keeps referring, prophetic imagination is socially constructed, and historically conditioned. For Soroush, this implies that the outcome of imaginative faculty of the prophet, as reflected in the Qur'an and the tradition is, in principle, relative to the culture or time from which it emerged, unless otherwise proven.

To further explain this point, he dwells on the issue of Gabriel who is widely taken to be the angel responsible for revelation. He also dwells on the nature of Gabriel's link to the prophet in the process of revelation. Soroush argues that the alleged role Gabriel played in the process of Muhammadan revelation was only to prepare Muhammad to achieve his own independent knowledge, which is an authentic knowledge as Mulla Sadra pointed out in the above quotation.

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[92] Abdel Haleem's translation, except for the translation of the verb *awha* which was translated by him as 'inspired'; for that I, instead, opted for Arberry's translation of this verb as 'revealed'.

[93] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 330–31. The accurate reference to Mulla Sadra is: Mulla Sadra al-Shirazi, *Al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliya fi al-Asfar al-'Aqliyya al-Arba'a [The Transcendent Theosophy in the Four Journeys of the Intellect]*, ed. Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1990), 9.

[94] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 331.

Gabriel's alleged role, however, is by no means to lecture Muhammad just like a teacher tends to lecture a student. To illustrates the involvement of the faculty of imagination in revelation, Soroush highlights sura 35, verse 1: 'Praise be to God, Creator of the heavens and earth, who made angels messengers with two, three, four [pairs of] wings.' Soroush argues that in depicting angels as having multiple wings prophetic imagination has played a significant role. He refers, among others, to Tabataba'i who holds that since angels are not corporeal beings, wings that are attributed to the angels in the Qur'an should be construed as their powers. For Tabataba'i angels appear to prophets in corporeal form, while still in their nature they are beyond any such form.[95]

What Soroush takes from Tabataba'i and other exegetes who share Tabataba'i's view, however, is not that the angels appear to the prophet in a special form which is different from the real nature of angels, but Soroush takes something much more fundamental from them: in the process of revelation, it is possible that things might appear to prophets in a different way from the way they really are. The job of prophets, Soroush goes on to put forward, in the process of revelation is then not to describe things as they receive them, but to give a form to the formless truth (i.e. the divine truth). These forms are the creation of the prophet's power of imagination, and his imagination is both socially constructed, and historically conditioned, but they in one way or another finally point successfully towards the formless truth.

Building on the explanation of the specific case of 'angels' in the Qur'anic revelation, Soroush then comes up with a general theory of the Qur'anic key terms. Not only is it that angelic wings, and flying angels are the outcome of the prophet's imagination, but the key Qur'anic terms such as 'tablet' (*lawh*),[96] 'pen' (*qalam*),[97] 'throne' (*'arsh*),[98] 'fire' (*nar*),[99] 'houris',[100] 'paths' (*sirat*),[101] 'scales' (*mizan*),[102] and so on bear the same imaginational feature. That the imagination of Muhammad's mind is deeply reflected in the language of the Qur'an is taken by Soroush to imply that the Qur'an is socially constructed, and historically conditioned. Referring to the above-mentioned Qur'anic key terms, Soroush concludes 'these are all images that have been borrowed from the life and environment to which the Prophet was accustomed.'[103]

Soroush is quick to add that prophets and mystics have always been concerned with this worry, that the forms might finally become veils hiding the formless rather than being their

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[95] Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, vol. 17 (Beirut: A'lami, 1997), 13.
[96] *Lawh*, in single form, is used in Q, 85: 22 and in plural forms, *alwah*, in numerous verses of the Qur'an, such as 7: 145.
[97] *Qalam* is used in two verses of the Qur'an, 68: 1 & 96: 4.
[98] *'Arsh* is mentioned in numerous verses of the Qur'an, such as 20: 5.
[99] *Nar* is mentioned in numerous verses of the Qur'an, such as 2: 39.
[100] Houris is mentioned in numerous verses of the Qur'an, such as 52: 20.
[101] *Sirat* is mentioned in numerous verses, such as 10: 25.
[102] *Mizan* is mentioned in numerous verses, such as 55: 7.
[103] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 332.

indication. The prophetic job of giving form to the formless faces two inevitable limitations: first, is the limitation of the linguistic forms utilized by the prophet to give form to his prophetic experience of the formless. As frequently mentioned, for Soroush these forms are socially constructed and historically conditioned, and that is why they have limitations. The 'Arabic language of Islam and the endorsement of many local customs of 'Arabs by Muhammad (which is taken to bear the hallmark of God's precepts) are rather two prime examples of the limitations imposed upon the Muhammadan form that is given to the formless. Any language, including 'Arabic, is culturally shaped, and it is the culture that provides material for the way Muhammad in the process of revelation gives shape and form to the formless.

Soroush then argues that to endorse and elaborate the humanness of the Qur'anic revelation is an extension of the Qur'anic logic, rather than a position against it:

> The Prophet's contemporaries used to express surprise at the fact that he ate food and walked through the streets and alleyways just like them. ("They also say, What ails this Messenger that he eats food, and goes to the market?"—25: 7) They thought that a prophet was like an angel; never eating or marrying. And today, our critics say: What sort of Prophet is it that feeds on the culture of his time and strides through the streets and alleyways of history? The logic is the same in both. Both want a Prophet that is super-human. Humanness is historical, linguistic and cultural. You would have to be angel to escape from these things.[104]

Being a prophet and friend (*wali*) of God does not, however, rule out being human, with all inherent limitations embedded in it.

According to Soroush, viewing the Qur'an as a 'human-historical text' would provide us with the best explanation of the Muslim scripture, which is also compatible with a believer's point of view, in the sense that it is does not compromise the divinity of the text. To elaborate further, he alludes to some historical events that cannot be explained without referring to the historical and geographical conditions within which the Qur'an was shaped. That the Qur'an invites its addresses to reflect on the camel, which was the symbol of Arab Bedouin way of life, to realize God's power of creation,[105] or that the Qur'an disapprovingly speaks of the practice of burying unwanted female infants alive that was presumably done by some 'Arabs at Muhammad's time,[106] or that the Qur'an speaks about the 'Arab pagan belief that the angels are the daughters of God,[107] are some of the examples that Soroush makes to show that the Qur'an is deeply embedded in the Hijaz of the 7th Century.[108]

The conclusion Soroush draws from highlighting the humanity-historicity of the Qur'an is that the Qur'an is not dictated from above, rather it springs naturally from the heart of the prophet,

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[104] Ibid., 334.
[105] Q. 88: 17.
[106] Q. 81: 8.
[107] Q. 37: 149 & 50.
[108] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 335–36.

the God's role is only to create Muhammad, and to send him as a prophet, the rest is entirely up to Muhammad:

> God simply sent the "teacher"; everything else revolved around his experiences and his reactions. This teacher was so well-equipped that he knew exactly what to do and what to say. And, of course, he was human, with all the moods and dispositions that a human being can have.[109]

It is already mentioned that Sobhani criticised very briefly the way Soroush used this principle that every originated or emergent or accident being is preceded by material potentiality and time. According to Sobhani, this principle is only applicable to 'the material creations', and has nothing to do with 'the incorporeal beings' such as divine revelation. Soroush disagrees with Sobhani's take on this principle; Soroush argues that according to Sadra this principle is not only applicable to the corporeal bodies and the material phenomena, but also to forms that are associated with matter, such as human soul, which bears both material and form. [110] Only to 'purely immaterial beings' (*al-mufariqat al-mahda*) this principle is not applicable, whilst Muhammad, like any other human being, is a not a 'purely immaterial being' but a combination of body and form.

Soroush then, very briefly though explicitly, lays out the theological foundation upon which he founds his theory of divine revelation. These theological foundations centre around a specific conception of God-human relationship that, Soroush claims, is in line with 'the metaphysics of Muslim philosophers' but is far from Muslim 'orthodoxy'. First, Soroush states that God has no attribution of 'intention' whatsoever, and it is impossible for God to do something in order to achieve an aim. As God has no intention, it is impossible for God to change His/Her/Its intention or make new decision; God has no changing will. Therefore, the Qur'anic revelation cannot be explained by the 'orthodox' picture that for each and every event reflected in the Qur'an, God has decided to convey His/Her/Its decree, and consequently a revelation has accordingly been sent down, since a decision based on changing events cannot be attributed to God. As Soroush explains, we need to change the analogy we usually adopt to make sense of the God-human relationship, which is the sultan-servant analogy, the sultan-servant analogy should be abandoned for a new one:

> God does not govern the world in the way that a king governs a country; God governs the world in the way that a soul governs a body (according to classical natural philosophy). The body works like a self-regulating machine but it is under the soul's pervasive sway.[111]

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[109] Ibid., 338.

[110] Soroush's reference is to: Mulla Sadra, *Al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliya Fi al-Asfar al-'Aqliyya al-Arba'a [The Transcendent Theosophy in the Four Journeys of the Intellect]*, 7:3: 55.

[111] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 340.

Soroush, in this way, radically departs from the anthropomorphic conceptions of God, a moderated version of which has reached the level of 'orthodoxy'.[112]

Soroush then responds to Sobhani on the issue of science-religion conflict. Sobhani's position, as explained above, is that the real conflict between science and revelation is not possible, but the conflict only lies between fallible scientific theories and discoveries, and an interpretation of revelation. Soroush's response is that the way theologians like Sobhani treat science and religion conflict is a double standard. On the one hand, they use scientific evidence to prove the existence of God, as for example in the case of the argument from design.[113] On the other hand, when an incongruity arises between science and religion they highlight the limitedness and fallibility of human sciences, while this is the same limited and fallible science to which they appeal to prove God. Instead of taking a double standard approach toward (scientific and philosophical) reason and revelation debate, Soroush recommends, 'the important thing is to open the door to dialogue between revelation and reason, not to subject one to the other's command.'[114]

As a case of what he takes to be the incongruity between some Qur'anic verses and modern science, Soroush refers to the concept of 'the seven heavens' (*al-samawat al-sab',* or *sab' samawat*) in the Qur'an.[115] He argues that all Muslim commentators until the end of Nineteenth Century would interpret this concept based on the Ptolemaic theory. It was only in the end of the Nineteenth and the beginning of Twentieth Century that Muslim exegetes set about to reinterpret the concept of 'the seven heavens' based on modern science. Rather than saying its real meaning has yet to be discovered (and this is the position Sobhani took), Soroush holds that taking a non-double standard position requires that the Qur'anic reference to 'the seven heaven' is to be construed as reflecting 'underdeveloped science of the time' in which the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad.[116]

The reflection of the science of the time, however, can be interpreted in two rather different ways: either Muhammad's knowledge is in keeping with the knowledge of his own times and does not considerably go beyond that level, or this reflection is because Muhammad adopted a language

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[112] For a glance at the history of anthropomorphism in the early Islam and the role of Ibn Hanbal in shaping it, see Wesley Williams, "Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 441–63.

[113] The argument from design or teleological argument is *a posteriori* (empirical) argument for the existence of God. It refers to exquisite structure, function or interconnectedness of the universe to argue that its best explanation is that a deliberative and supernatural mind is behind these phenomena. Contemporary advocates of argument from design usually appeals to scientific developments (in biology, biochemistry, mathematics and cosmology) to come up with most updated versions of the argument. For an overview of the argument, see: Del Ratzsch and Jeffrey Koperski, "Teleological Arguments for God's Existence," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entrieseleological-arguments/. For a short monograph on the argument, see Thomas H. McPherson, *The Argument from Design* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1972).

[114] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 341.

[115] Q. 2: 29; 17: 44; 23: 86; 41: 12; 65: 12; 67: 3; 71: 15.

[116] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 336.

that is in compliance with the language of the people of his own time, in order to make the Qur'an comprehensive for them, though Muhammad himself has unlimited knowledge. Soroush is obviously inclined to the former option, maintaining that to consider Muhammad as having a limited knowledge does not undermine his prophecy. He mentions Ibn 'Arabi as sharing his position.[117]

At the end of his last letter to Sobhani, Soroush reiterates the outcome of his epistemology of religion according to which the diversity of religious understanding is an integral part of any religion: 'Islam is all the understandings and interpretations of it to date (as is Christianity, Judaism, Marxism, etc.)'.[118] If this is the case, then theological and exegetical fluidity should not be suffocated in the name of 'orthodoxy'. Rather, diverse theological and philosophical theories have to be wholeheartedly welcomed and embraced by seminarians and religious leaders.

As said before, Sobhani did not respond to the second letter of Soroush. This, hence, marks the end of the first phase of the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation.

5.3 Revelation as Prophetic Dream, the Second Phase

Soroush's second letter to Sobhani, as said before, was dated May 2008. Five years later in 2013 Soroush wrote a series of essays to further elaborate his theory of revelation. This marks the second phase of his theory. Generally speaking, the second phase seems to be in keeping with the first phase. However, the focus of the second phase has somewhat shifted. While in the first phase of the theory the focus was on showing that the Qur'an is Muhammadan speech, rather than divine speech, the second phase focuses on the nature of the Qur'an as Muhammadan speech.

This seems a consistent development in his theory, since if the Qur'an is taken to be Muhammadan speech, one might reasonably ask what kind of speech it might look like. Soroush wrote six consecutive essays altogether to explain the nature of the Qur'anic language as Muhammadan speech. For him, in order to adequately explain the nature of the Qur'anic language, one should develop a phenomenology of Muhammadan religious experience, specifically as reflected in the Qur'an. These six essays are supposed to take up this mission.[119]

The whole series is entitled 'Muhammad the narrator of prophetic dreams' (*Muhammad ravi-yi ru'yaha-yi rasulani*). The title speaks for itself. In this series, Soroush mainly argues that the language

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[117] Ibid., 342. See also p. 297. For Ibn 'Arabi the prophet is not supposed to be necessarily superior to all other people in all aspects of life, see Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi, *Ibn Al-Arabi's Fusus Al-Hikam: An Annotated Translation of "The Bezels of Wisdom,"* trans. Binyamin Abrahamov (London/New York: Routledge, 2015), 31 & 164.

[118] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 343.

[119] It should be mentioned that unlike the first phases of his theory of revelation, the second phase has not yet been printed in the book form in Persian either within or outside of Iran, neither is it translated into English or any other languages. Therefore, the reference would be to the website in which the essay series were initially published. The translations would be entirely mine.

of the Qur'an is not the outcome of waking experience, as almost always taken to be the case by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, rather it is the outcome of a dreaming experience. The Qur'an, as a result, has a dream language, and not a waking one.

Soroush in the first essay elucidates his main claim. He maintains that Muhammad as a prophet of God is a narrator, and not a recipient of voices received from above (this is the first part of his main claim). Muhammad narrates what he sees in his dreams, and they are not given to him by angels, rather what is revelation is his own dreams that are the end result of his inner and outer life (this is the second part of his main claim). Here is a quotation regarding the first part of his main claim in this essay series, which is the summary of the first phase of the theory discussed above:

> Instead of saying that in the Qur'an Allah is the speaker and Muhammad is the listener we say Muhammad is the viewer (*nazir*) and narrator. There is no address (*khitab*) or addressee or giving information or informer, neither is there speaker nor speech. The Qur'an is a bottom-up rather than a top-down work. All these are, of course, under Allah's supervision and with Allah's permission.[120]

What is specifically important is the second part of his claim; he takes Muslim revelation to be audio-visual, and mainly visual rather than auditory, while Muslim 'orthodoxy' takes it to be auditory. The visual experience of Muhammad, however, belongs to the realm of the dream, and not to the waking realm. The Qur'an, therefore, is a 'book of dream' (*khabnami*),[121] for it bears the feature of a dream language, and not a waking language. Since the language narrating the realm of the dream is always misty, and mysterious it should not be conflated with the waking language. The main difference between the dream language and the waking language is not that the former is mysterious while the latter is not, for the latter could also be mysterious. The main difference is that the dream language needs 'dream interpretation' (*khabguzari*), while the waking language needs 'exegesis' (*tafsir*).

Due to the significance of this distinction for the second phase of the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation, there will be some further discussion required here. The difference Soroush makes between the nature of these two languages can be illustrated in this way: let us suppose that someone utters this proposition that 'Bruce Lee is a lion' based on watching Lee's martial art movies. Let us further suppose that someone else narrates that one sees in one's dream Bruce Lee in the form of a lion and, based on this dream, one believes that 'Bruce Lee is a lion'. Despite the fact that the two propositions are the same, the former is rooted in a waking experience,

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[120] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-Yi Ru'yaha-Yi Rasulani-1 [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-1]," *Jaras (Jonbish-i Rah-i Sabz)* (blog), June 18, 2013, http://www.rahesabz.net/story/71738/.

[121] Soroush, as far as I can see, uses *khab* (literally means sleep), and *ro'ya* (dream) interchangeably. I, therefore, opted to translate both as dream.

while the latter is rooted in a dream experience. Therefore, the former proposition should be interpreted, for example, in this way that: since Bruce Lee is famously brave, he has been likened to a lion, which is the symbol of braveness. But to make full sense of the latter proposition, one should invoke a dream interpretation, as for instance by saying that the dream owner might have had this belief that Bruce Lee is so brave in such a way that Lee was represented unconsciously in a lion form in one's dream.[122]

For the interpretation of the former one need not invoke a dream interpretation, whereas for the latter it seems necessary. A significant difference Soroush makes between exegesis, and dream interpretation is that in the waking realm the proposition 'Bruce Lee is a lion' should be interpreted symbolically (such as: due to his braveness Bruce Lee is likened to the lion as the symbol of braveness), while the same proposition in the dream realm cannot be interpreted symbolically. The owner of the dream has *literally* seen Bruce Lee in lion from. No symbol—at least not directly and intentionally—is involved here. That is why here there is a need to appeal to a dream interpretation to make full sense of it:

> In dreamy language, no metonymy (*kinayi*) or figurative language (*majaz*) are involved. Words in dream are to be taken as bearing their literal meanings. However, the literal meaning of them cannot be grasped by consulting a lexicon. For that one should make use of the techniques of dream interpretation.[123]

To get back to my explanatory example above, when the owner of the dream sees in his/her dream a lion Bruce Lee, he/she does not see Bruce Lee *as* a lion, but he/she literally sees a lion in the dream which at the same time *is* Bruce Lee.

Soroush then draws this general conclusion from his discussion, that the distinction between dream language and waking language is crucial for comprehending the language of the Qur'an. The pivotal conclusion he draws is that the theory of 'the Qur'anic revelation as prophetic dream' does not leave room for a huge number of the Qur'anic expressions to be taken as figurative, rather they all can be construed as literal. The debate over what is meant by 'God's hand' in this Qur'anic verse could provide us with an example to make his point clear: 'those who pledge loyalty to you [Prophet] are actually pledging loyalty to God Himself– God's hand is placed on theirs'.[124] Since God has been widely taken as not having any bodily characteristics, and therefore being incorporeal, the surface meaning of 'God's hand' in this verse proved to be problematic. The

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[122] The difference between the two propositions can be put more technically utilizing 'speech act theory'. Those who have uttered the same proposition mentioned above have done the same locutionary act –i.e., both have uttered the same utterance with the same surface meaning. But their illocutionary acts are different –i.e., they mean different things by the same proposition. For the initial exposition of the distinction between what one utters (locutionary act) and what one means by the utterance (illocutionary act), see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 94ff.

[123] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-1".

[124] Q. 48: 10.

majority of exegetes interpret the expression 'God's hand' symbolically and metaphorically rather than literally.[125] In Soroush's view, however, there is no need to interpret the verse metaphorically, nor to interpret it literally in the ordinary sense of the term, and thereby compromising God's incorporeality and consequently God's transcendence. Rather, the verse can be taken as a narration of Muhammad's dream in which he literally sees God's hand placed above those who pledged loyalty to him. In this way, the verse can be interpreted literally, without compromising God's incorporeality, and consequently God's transcendence.

Soroush is emphatic that his theory of revelation is not an ontological theory of revelation, rather it is a phenomenological theory. By this he means the theory is not concerned with the metaphysical nature of revelation as such, rather it is concerned with how the phenomenon of revelation appears in history. Though Soroush has not come up with a new ontological theory of revelation, he has however critiqued the 'orthodox' ontological theory of revelation.

We already saw how he argued that the Qur'an should not be taken as the literal word of God, rather it should be understood as the word of Muhammad himself, and only metaphorically as the word of God. The critique of the 'orthodox' ontological theory of revelation, hence, is centrally involved in his theory of revelation. His theory, as a whole, therefore is at least negatively concerned with the ontology of revelation. However, the second phase of his theory of revelation is mainly, but as we shall see not exclusively, concerned with the phenomenology of revelation.

A related further claim made by Soroush is that his theory is also not theological (i.e. apologetic), in the sense that he is neither willing to prove the prophecy of Muhammad, nor the veracity of his revelatory dreams. Regardless of one's personal convictions, he holds, one can benefit from his theory of revelation to have a better grasp of the phenomenon of revelation as historically occurred in the case of the Qur'an. Of course, for believers the Qur'an is the source of religious inspiration and guidance for salvation, while for non-believers it is only a literary work like the works of Shakespeare for instance.[126]

Having said that, Soroush once again tries to show that his theory is not alien to, and detached from prophetic and Shi'i traditions. He quotes some traditions delineating prophethood and revelation as, at least partially, being related to true dreams. He appeals, for instance, to the famous tradition, attributed to, among others, the prophet Muhammad in both Sunni and Shi'i hadith collections: 'a righteous good dream that comes true (*al-ru'ya al-saliha*) is one of the forty-six

[125] Nasr et al., *The Study Quran,* 1250.
[126] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-Yi Ru'yaha-Yi Rasulani-2 [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-2]," *Jaras (Jonbish-I Rah-I Sabz)*, October 7, 2013, http://www.rahesabz.net/story/72728/.

parts of Prophethood (*al-Nabuwwa*),'[127] or to this tradition attributed to 'Ali: 'dream of prophets is revelation (*wahy*)'.[128]

The main claim of Soroush, then, in the second phase of his theory of the Qur'anic revelation is that the best explanation of the Qur'anic language would be that it is thoroughly of a dream kind. This claim is mainly based on the phenomenological analysis of Muhammadan religious experience as reflected in the Qur'an. Soroush divides the Qur'anic language into two main parts, one part speaks about the 'invisible' (*ghayb*), and the other about the 'visible' (*shahada*): 'when speaking of the invisible, such as angels, resurrection (*qiyama*), Satan, jinn, the throne (*'arsh*) and scale (*mizan*), the Qur'anic expression is so visual and artistic that it is hard not to take it as being of a dream kind'.[129] He then brings into his discussion a number of examples from the Qur'anic account of the invisibles to argue for the dreaminess of the language of the Qur'anic revelation, which for him shows the dreaminess of Muhammadan religious (revelatory) experience.[130]

Soroush then argues that the visible part of the Qur'anic language seems like bearing the feature of the waking language. It contains, for instance, some historical accounts of previous generations, prophets, and also commandments and prohibitions. Since the legalistic treatment of the Qur'an has been historically predominant in Muslim cultures, the Qur'anic commandments and prohibitions, which bear the feature of visible and waking language, came to find paradigmatic status in analysing the language of the Qur'an. In view of Soroush, however, the pseudo-waking language of the Qur'an, as especially reflected in its commandments and prohibitions, is to be construed in the light of the dreamy parts, as especially reflected in the Qur'anic account of the invisibles, and not the other way around.

The further claim that Soroush makes, though does not argue for it, is that there is no middle position between the waking language and the dreamy one, or there is no combination of both. The Qur'anic language is either completely a waking language or completely of the dream

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[127] Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari, the Translation of Meanings*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), Vol. 9 hadith n. 6983, 6986-6989, 6994, 7017. It is mentioned with some differences in Sahih Muslim: 'The dream of a Muslim is one of the forty-five parts of Prophethood'. Ibn al-Hajjaj Muslim, *Sahih Muslim, English Translation*, ed. Hafiz Abu Tahir Zubair 'All Za'i, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), Vol. 6 hadith n. 5905. But again it is frequently mentioned in this source quite similar to Bukhari: 'The dream of a believer is one of the forty-six parts of Prophethood', Muslim, hadith n. 5906. In Shi'i sources, for example in *Bihar al-anwar* of Majlisi, however, it is mentioned with a significant quantitative difference while attributed to both the prophet and Imam Sadiq (the seventh Shi'i Imam): 'A righteous good dream that comes true is one of the seventeen parts of Prophethood'. Muhammad Baqir Al-Majlisi, *Bihar Al-Anwar al-Jami'a Li-Durar-i A'immat al-Athar [Oceans of Light an Encyclopedia for Pearls of Traditions of the Pure Imams]* (Qum: Nur-i Vahy, 2009), vo. 61. ch. 44 hadith n. 19, 36, 58. It is also mentioned as 'one of the sixty-four parts of prophethood', al-Majlisi, hadith n. 61.

[128] Al-Majlisi, *Bihar Al-Anwar*, vo. 61. ch. 44 hadith n. 42.

[129] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 2."

[130] I shall address some of these examples later in this chapter.

kind. But it cannot be of the waking kind, even if some parts of it would appear to be so. Then, it is thoroughly of the dream kind. This is a radical paradigm shift in the analysis of the Qur'anic language, Soroush is aware of it, and explicitly endorses it.[131]

Soroush then combines the phenomenological analysis he was detailing in the second phase of his theory, with the first phase which was theological-metaphysical, to show how God is depicted in the vivid visions and dreams of Muhammad in an anthropomorphic way, and reflected accordingly in some, if not most, of the Qur'anic verses. But this anthropomorphic depiction cannot be taken at face value, and consequently dream interpretation is needed to extract the real meanings out of them. Soroush once again reiterates that since Muhammad discovers the intimate unity of his being with God, then what Muhammad thinks is like God's thought in a metaphorical sense of the term. This so-called divine thought was however reflected in Muhammadan form which brings to the fore all limitations a human being, however sublime, would inevitably face throughout his/her life.

Soroush then argues that analysing the Qur'anic divine revelation in terms of dreams does not amount to downgrading the importance of divine revelation. As God is ineffable and invisible, He/She/It can only become effable and visible through dreams. Dreams, however, are not all of the same kind. Prophetic dreams, of course, belong to lofty kind of dreams, and not to the distressed kind. Knowledge of prophetic dream is then critical in the Soroushian epistemology of revelation: 'people, including prophets, can be known through their dreams. It is through dreams that prophecy shows its smiling face, while legislations (*tashri'at*) belong to the lower portion of prophecy.'[132]

The theory of prophetic dreams, as Soroush claims, can better explain the non-chronological, non-linear, and non-narrative structure of the Qur'anic language. This also better explains, as he claims, the change of speaker from the first person singular ('I') to the first-person plural ('we') to the third person singular ('He') in the Qur'anic rhetoric. The theory also proves a better explanation, he further claims, for what Soroush takes to be the 'paradoxes' involved in the Qur'an.[133] The narrative structure of the Qur'an, according to him, is a function of 'misty' and

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131 Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 1."
132 Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 2."
133 For an alternative explanation of why the Qur'anic structure is non-chronological, non-linear, and non-narrative, see Ziauddin Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–20. Sardar argues that the Qur'an has its own logic of structure that is not sequential. Regarding 'paradoxes' in the Qur'an, Sardar argues they show the simultaneous and contextual logic of the Qur'an. These paradoxes displays how complex and multidimensional the Qur'an treats the issues discussed within it, see also page 227.

'drowsy' nature of dreams that usually possess no logical order, and thereby lack consistency and regularity.[134]

One consequence of this theory is that the Qur'anic narratives, even if reconstructed in a linear and chronological arrangement, should not be taken as historical narratives. The prophet, for instance, has become united with what Muhammad in his prophetic dreams thinks to be Moses, when Muhammad speaks about, *inter alia*, the story of Moses in the Qur'an.[135] Since there is no logical or chronological order in a dream, and one in a dreamlike situation could do or see things deemed impossible or highly unlikely in the waking world, the Qur'anic stories bring no historical bearing. The Qur'an is historically irrelevant in the sense that it tells us nothing about whether or not the historical Moses exists, and if so, what happened to him during his lifetime. Soroush goes even one step further claiming that 'when reporting the incidents of his own time the prophet's language is still non-historical. He sees the incidents in a different setting adding invisible and dreamy components to them.'[136]

In the third part of his essay series, with the fixed main title of 'Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams', while the subtitle of this part is 'the sharp scissors of contradiction', he dwells on what he takes to be the Qur'anic 'paradoxes'. His main argument is that 'discrepancies' and 'paradoxes' in the Qur'an rather than being a sing of 'inferiority' (*pasti*) and 'looseness' (*susti*) as some have claimed,[137] are a sign of the rich dreaminess of the nature of Qur'anic revelation that is not confined to the constraint logic of the waking language. As Soroush puts it 'the more the language of the Qur'an becomes dreamy, the more prophetic it becomes, to the extent that the paradoxes that appear in the Qur'an put the reader in difficulties.'[138] These 'paradoxes' show, as he claims, the richness of Muhammad's lofty dreams. Still to make full sense of them we need dream interpretation, and this is the difficulties they put us in.

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134 Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 2."

135 For an excerpt of the Qur'anic story of Moses, see Q. 2: 49-71.

136 Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 2."

137 Here Soroush refers, in a footnote without any elaboration, to Ali Dashti (1895-1982) an Iranian essayist, journalist, and politician, and specifically to his (in)famous book 'Twenty Three Years' (*Bist u Si Sal*), published anonymously in about 1974 at Beirut. Soroush does not discuss how Dashti takes the Qur'an to be 'inferior' and 'loose,' but he might have in mind Dashti's specific remarks that the Qur'an is unintelligible, ineloquent, and full of grammatical errors. See Ali Dashti, *Twenty Three Years: a Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammad*, trans. F. R. Bagley, (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1994), Ch. 2. Soroush is dismissive of Dashti calling him, borrowing a Hafez's poetic expression, among 'the immature ones of the path' (*khaman-i rah narafti*). It is worth mentioning, however, that both Soroush and Dashti have a lot in common when analysing the prophetic career of Muhammad. Like Dashti in his above-mentioned book, Soroush believes that prophet's 'ascension' (*mi'raj*) was a spiritual rather than a corporeal journey, the process of revelation works through Muhammad's own intellect, and the miracle of the Qur'an lies not in its eloquence, but in its historical impact.

138 Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-yi Ru'yaha-yi Rasulani-3 Miqraz-i Tiz-i Tanaquz [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-3 the Sharp Scissors of Contradiction]," *Jaras (Jonbish-i Rah-i Sabz)*, May 9, 2013, http://www.rahesabz.net/story/75103/.

Soroush, then, goes on to provide some examples of what he takes to be the paradoxes of the Qur'an considering them to be a sign of the dreaminess of the Qur'an. He, for example, underscores the paradoxical concept of 'the flaming sea' in the Qur'anic description of the upcoming of the day of judgement (*qiyama*), 'When the oceans are set aflame.'[139] Another example he makes is 'the tree of *Zaqqum'* that 'grows in the heart of the blazing Fire.'[140] Or, 'when you [Prophet] threw [sand at them] it was not your throw [that defeated them] but God's',[141] a verse that, according to Soroush, both attributes and denies the attribution of throwing to Muhammad.

For Soroush these examples and other similar examples, though 'paradoxical', are still conceivable. For him the most surprising example of what he takes to be the Qur'anic 'paradoxes' is the case in which the Qur'an comes up with an unconceivable 'paradox': 'He is the First and the Last; the Outer and the Inner.'[142] The God who is at the same time the first and the last, the outer and the inner is inconceivable—or so argues Soroush. He very briefly alludes to some exegetical efforts of Muslim exegetes, theologians, philosophers and mystics to find a way out of the paradoxical appearance of the verse. He concludes that the less problematic way, with more comprehensive explanatory power to solve this problem, is that instead of taking Aristotelian metaphysics into account or utilizing literary techniques, such as metaphor and analogy, it is better to take the nature of the Qur'an to be of a highly rich dream kind.[143]

Contrasting between paradoxes (what appears to be contradictory which might or might not be really contradictory), and contradictions, Soroush goes yet one step further arguing that not only the Qur'an contains paradoxes, but it also contains numerous contradictions. Here is one example he makes: God, on the one hand, is depicted in the Qur'an as a responsible God, to the extent that people could have in principle be excused before God, that is why God sends messengers 'so that mankind would have no excuse before God, once the messengers had been sent,'[144] to the extent that God sets a 'binding promise' upon Him/Her/Itself.[145] One the other hand, however, God is depicted as being beyond responsibility: 'He cannot be called to account for anything He does'.[146] Another evidence he offers for what he takes to be the Qur'anic 'contradictions' is when on the one hand God asks people to have faith in God,[147] and on the other

[139] Q. 81: 6. The translation is taken from Talal Itani, *Quran: English Translation* (Dallas/Beirut: ClearQuran, 2015).
[140] Q. 37: 62-8.
[141] Q. 8: 17.
[142] Q. 57: 3.
[143] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 3."
[144] Q. 4: 165.
[145] 'This is a binding promise from your Lord', Q. 25: 16.
[146] Q. 21: 23.
[147] See, e.g., 4: 136, 170.

hand only God can decide who can have faith in God: 'no soul can believe except by God's will,'[148] since only when God wills people to, will they take the straight path.[149]

Soroush claims that the Qur'an is full of 'contradictions' like these. He contends that these 'contradictions' contributed to the formation of both the Ash'ari school of theological thought that would put emphasis on God's sovereignty, and the Mu'tazili school that would highlight human free will. Both contrasting views are Qur'anic since the Qur'an has taken a 'contradictory' position, thereby giving way to both 'contradictory' theological positions. By showing what Soroush takes to be the 'paradoxes' and 'contradictions' of the Qur'an, he is not willing to degrade the Islamic scripture, as critics of Islam usually take these 'paradoxes' and 'contradictions' to discredit Islam, rather he tries to argue for the dream nature of the Qur'anic language: 'Paradoxes and contradictions are the requirements of the world of imagination (*hazrat-i khiyal*), the world of sleep and the dream language. What appears impossible and incompatible in the wake, appears possible and compatible in the sleep'.[150]

Soroush is aware of this objection one might level against the theory that the Qur'an itself denies the prophetic dream theory of the Qur'anic revelation by denying that there are any 'discrepancies' and 'inconsistencies' involved in the Scripture: 'If it had been from anyone other than God, they would have found much inconsistency in it'.[151] But much 'inconsistency' can be found in the Qur'an, according to Soroush. Then the Qur'an is either not revelatory, which Soroush thinks it is, nor is it dream in nature. It entails that in the dream world from which the Qur'anic revelation has come there is no 'contradiction', and what seems 'inconsistent' and 'contradictory' in the waking realm is very much consistent in the dream world.

Put it another way, rather than showing that the Qur'an is devoid of inconsistencies, the above verse shows, from his point of view, that the Qur'an belongs to the dream world, in which a different sense of logic functions. That is also why in the dream language of the Qur'an there is no causality, and everything can come out of everything (for example a tree can grow in the heart of hell fire). And that is why time in the Qur'an is not chronological, and the past and the future merge into each other, or take one another's place.

In the fourth part of his article series, with the subtitle 'ruling out shari'a and the denial of [prophetic] mission' he responds to the numerous objections raised against his theory. The first objection is that since dream is not an epistemically reliable source of knowledge, or put it another way it has no 'probative force' (*hojjat*), reducing revelation to dreams adds up to the denial of the

[148] Q. 10: 100.
[149] Q. 81: 28-9.
[150] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 3."
[151] Q. 4: 82.

epistemic reliability of revelation and this is tantamount to denying the prophetic invitation and divine mission. The objection was raised, among others,[152] by Mohsen Armin (b. 1954) an Iranian reformist politician, the former member of Iranian parliament, and a scholar in Islamic studies.[153] Instead of substantiating the epistemic reliability of dreams, Soroush reminds the reader that his main goal in the theory of prophetic dreams is not to prove or disprove revelation, rather to provide a phenomenology of revelatory experience of Muhammad as reflected in the Qur'an. If Muhammad is for believers a prophet of God, and it turns out that his revelatory experience is based on dream, then Muhammad's dreams would also be reliable for them. He, nonetheless, adds that a correct phenomenological theory of revelation might pave the way for the endorsement of revelation, but it is not the main objective of his theory.[154]

Another objection says that the theory rules out the possibility of metaphorical and figurative techniques used in the Qur'an.[155] This, the objection continues, takes the Qur'an to be devoid of literary ornament and beauty, and thereby denies the 'literary inimitability' (*i'jaz-i adabi*) of the Qur'an. Unlike the response to the previous objection, the response that Soroush provides to this objection is rather more detailed. His response is that in light of his theory of revelation, the Qur'anic metaphors remain intact, but we need a theory of metaphor which is different from the mainstream theory. The outcome of this new theory of metaphor is that to make sense of the Qur'anic metaphors instead of exegetical interpretation we need dream interpretation.

The main function of metaphor, Soroush explains, is not to add to the beauty of speech, as what Soroush takes to be the mainstream Muslim theory of metaphor, though beauty might be its by-product. Rather, metaphor is mainly used 'to say the unsayable and to show the unshowable'.[156] To produce genuine metaphors, according to this alternative theory, one ought to have 'peculiar experiences', like having the peculiar dream of seeing a lion Bruce Lee.

Here in a footnote Soroush refers to Donald Davidson (1917-2003), an American philosopher. Soroush contends that his theory of metaphor is close to that of Davidson. Like Soroush, Davidson envisages a close tie between dream and metaphor. As Davidson puts

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[152] When discussing this critique and some other critiques, in addition to Armin, Soroush also refers to another critic, called Ja'far Nekounam. See Jafar Nekounam, "Naqd-i Nazariyy-Yi Ru'yaha-Yi Rasulani [The Critique of the Theory of Prophetic Dreams]," *Jaras (Jonbish-i Rah-i Sabz)* (blog), http://www.rahesabz.net/story/75046/.

[153] Mohsen Armin, "Intifa'-i Da'vat va Imtina'-i Risalat [Ruling out [Prophetic] Invitation and the Denial of [Prophetic] Mission]," *Jaras (Jonbish-i Rah-i Sabz)* (blog), October 10, 2013, http://www.rahesabz.net/story/76637/.

[154] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-Yi Ru'yaha-Yi Rasulani-4 Intifa'-i Shari'at va Imtina'-i Risalat [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-4 Ruling out Shari'a and the Denial of [Prophetic] Mission]," *Jaras (Jonbish-i Rah-i Sabz)* (blog), http://www.rahesabz.net/story/80689/.

[155] In addition to Armin, from whom Soroush brings a quotation, Soroush also attributes this objection to Nekounam without quotation. As far as I can see, however, Nekounam has not raised this objection. See Nekounam, "The Critique of the Theory of Prophetic Dreams." For Armin's objection, see Armin, "Ruling out Invitation and the Denial of Mission."

[156] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 4."

'Metaphor is the dreamwork of language'.[157] The process of metaphorical interpretation is much like the process of dream interpretation:

> The interpretation of dreams requires collaboration between a dreamer and a waker, even if they be the same person; and the act of interpretation is itself a work of the imagination. So too understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavour as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules.[158]

Like Soroush, Davidson holds that metaphor does not add to the literal meaning of the words. In metaphor no extra meaning but only literal meaning is involved. For example, influenced by his/her dream when a dreamer says 'Bruce Lee is a lion' he/she literally means it. The objective of metaphor is to present a resemblance one might discover through one's experience between metaphor and the subject for which the metaphor is used.[159]

Another critique that Soroush addresses and tries to meet is an objection that the prophetic dream theory of the Qur'anic revelation leads to 'libertinage' (*ibaha*), and the abolition of shari'a. According to the dream theory 'the apparent meaning' (*zaher*) of the Qur'anic legal verses (*ayat al-ahkam*) has no 'probative force' (*hujjiyya*), and one has to appeal to the symbolic and psychological interpretations to make sense of them. This, the objection concludes, would result in 'libertinism' and the 'abolition' of shari'a. Soroush in response reiterates his theory of religious law that 'legislations' (*tashri'at*) belong to the lower portion of prophecy. This requires that religious law cannot be given a central role in the study of divine revelation. Soroush tries to back his theory of the peripherality of religious law by referring to a Qur'anic verse which he thinks to be widely ignored by Muslim jurists:

> You who believe, do not ask about matters which, if made known to you, might make things difficult for you– if you ask about them while the Qur'an is being revealed, they will be made known to you– for God has kept silent about them: God is most forgiving and forbearing. Before you, some people asked about things, then ignored. [the answers][160]

As Soroush explains, the matters about which the Qur'an asks us not to ask any questions have been taken by most Qur'an commentators to be related to legal issues. The most widely cited account about the revelation of theses verses report that after prophet Muhammad announced that pilgrimage to Macca is incumbent upon believers, one of his followers asked him frequently whether it is incumbent every year upon them. The prophet kept ignoring the question three times

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157 Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 245.
158 Ibid.
159 For more on Davidson's theory of metaphor, see Elisabeth Camp, "Metaphor and Varieties of Meaning," in *A Companion to Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). For a review of other theories of metaphor, see David Hills, "Metaphor," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/metaphor/.
160 Q. 5: 101-2.

until he responded: 'No. But if I had said yes, it would have been obligatory for you'.[161] Soroush concludes from these Qur'anic verses and their interpretation that legal matters are accidental (*'arazi*), and peripheral rather than pivotal to religious salvation, and therefore the Qur'an is not to be considered as the book of law. The result of wide ignorance of the above mentioned Qur'anic prohibition (that do not give legal issues any priority when it comes to salvation), is that Islamic law not only has become inflated with unnecessarily detailed rulings and legal opinions (*fatawa*), but also 'has allowed vices and abandoned human rights.'[162]

Soroush then explains the phenomenological roots of the Qur'anic legislations in the light of his prophetic dream theory of revelation. The Qur'anic legal rulings are rooted in the dream experience of Muhammad in a way that they are expressions of this experience. 'Ends' Soroush says 'such as purity (*taharat*) and luminosity (*nuraniyyat*) have been appeared to Muhammad as rites and rituals'.[163] To illustrate this he specifically focuses on the purification rituals. He quotes a qur'anic verse in which after detailing how to perform ablution (*wudu*), full ablution (*ghusl*) and dry ablution (*tayammum*) it reads: 'God does not wish to place any burden on you: He only wishes to cleanse you and perfect His blessing on you, so that you may be thankful.'[164] Soroush highlights the fact that how dry ablution has 'paradoxically' been taken as the sign of cleanness.[165] This shows, he concludes, the rites and rituals legislated by the Qur'an are rooted in the dream expression of Muhammad. It is only in such a dream experience that wiping face and hands with sand in the case of dry ablution would clean the believer.

For the sake of argument, Soroush further argues that let it be supposed that the prophetic dream theory of the Qur'anic revelation would lead to the wholesale abolition of shari'a. Would this lead us to libertinism? The answer for him is negative, it is because even with the alleged abolition of shari'a, ethical norms remains mainly intact, because ethics are 'para-religious' (*fara-dini*), in the sense of being in principle, independent of religious legislation.

The fourth objection states that the dream theory of the Qur'anic divine revelation is unfalsifiable, implying that any unfalsifiable theory is indefensible. The theory is unfalsifiable, according to this objection, because whatever citations the critics might bring from the Qur'an in order to disprove the theory, the theory in response takes these Qur'anic citations to be of a dream kind as well, hence confirming the theory rather than disproving it. Soroush accepts that his theory

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[161] Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 328.
[162] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 4."
[163] Ibid.
[164] Q. 5: 6.
[165] According to the Qur'anic prescription dry ablution involves 'taking some clean sand and wiping face and hands with it'. See Q. 5: 6.

is unfalsifiable. But he is quick to add that the 'orthodox' theory of revelation is also equally unfalsifiable.

To be more precise, he further explains that it is scientific-empirical theories that are supposed to be either falsifiable. But research programs such as theories of revelation are either criticisable or uncriticizable. Not only is his theory criticisable, he claims, but also preferable to the 'orthodox' theory of revelation. It is because the dream theory is consistent, that it explains the Qur'anic 'paradoxes' and other problems in a comprehensive and simple way. But the 'orthodox' theory of revelation, even assuming it is compatible with the 'proper' conception of God, and also it is able to explain away the Qur'anic 'paradoxes' and other problems, it has to inevitably come up with *ad hoc* explanations for each and every one of these problems, and it makes the 'orthodox' theory unnecessarily complex and incomprehensive. To sum up, although the prophetic dream theory of revelation is unfalsifiable, it is criticisable, and also preferable to the 'orthodox' theory of revelation which is equally unfalsifiable.

He, then, once again raises and refutes the objection that the prophetic dream theory of the Qur'anic revelation does not square with the apparent meanings of a number of the Qur'anic verses, such as 'We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you [people] may understand.'[166] In refuting this widely-raised objection, Soroush appeals to his epistemological theory of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge. 'No interpretation is possible without presuppositions'[167] he says. Epistemologically speaking, both advocates of 'orthodox' theory of revelation, and also those of alternative theories, equally bring to bear their presuppositions when interpreting the Qur'an. To say that the apparent meanings of the Qur'an endorse the 'orthodox' theory of revelation, thus, begs the question.

When interpreting the Qur'an, or any other texts for that matter, it is the web of—conscious or otherwise—presuppositions of the interpreter that determines when to appeal to the apparent meanings of the Qur'an, and when to go beyond them. Therefore, instead of mechanical appealing to this or that apparent meanings of the Qur'anic verses, the various presuppositions of the interpreter, brought to bear when interpreting the Qur'an, should be put to scrutiny.

Here comes another objection. While the prophetic dream theory of revelation takes the nature of the Qur'anic revelatory language to be of dream kind, Soroush himself makes use of the Qur'anic verses as if they reflect the waking language. Soroush accepts that his way of using the Qur'an may appear to be so. He, however, gives two reasons why he is justified in doing that even in the light of his own dream theory. One is that he has done so in a dialectical manner, that is to

[166] Q. 12: 2.
[167] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 4."

use the presumption of a rival theory against itself.[168] The second reason is quite interesting: 'in dream, according to dream interpreters, some of those things being heard or seen are very much far from the waking world, while some are close to it'.[169]

The seventh objection states that the theory of Soroush denies causality when passing this judgment that in the dream language of the Qur'an there is no causality, and everything could come out of everything (for example a tree can grow in the heart of hell fire). This is pure Ash'arism, since Ash'aris are known as denying causality to make room for the absolute sovereignty of God. As Soroush recognizes himself as a 'new-Mu'tazili' it is unexpected from him to take an Ash'ari position on causality.[170] In his rejoinder Soroush shows sympathy with the critiques of causality, implying that what he takes to be the denial of causality by the Qur'an does not render the Qur'an unintelligible and unreasonable.[171]

In order to further elaborate what he takes to be the dream nature of the Qur'anic revelation, in the fifth part of his essay series, Soroush focuses on the tale of Muhammad's 'night journey' from Mecca to Jerusalem (*isra'*) and his 'ascension' to heaven from Jerusalem (*mi'raj*). Soroush claims that among the dreamy experiences of Muhammad reflected in the Qur'an two are rather salient: the experience of ascension, and resurrection (*ma'ad*). They thereby require special attention.[172]

Though the Qur'an alludes rather vaguely and shortly to what is widely taken to be the experience of ascension,[173] the story of ascension was developed by traditionists, historians, and theologians to portray the Muslim community as a distinct confessional community, synthesizing and superseding previous revelations. The story of ascension, then 'provides an excellent example

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168 Dialectical argument is a method of logical argument. In such an argument one makes use of an interlocutor's position, to which one oneself might not subscribe, usually to show that the premises upon which the interlocutor's position is based leads to absurd or contradictory conclusions, and hence is indefensible. See Robin Smith, "Aristotle's Logic," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/aristotle-logic/.

169 Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 4."

170 Armin, "Ruling out Invitation and the Denial of Mission."

171 For an overview of Muslim theories of causation, see Kara Richardson, "Causation in Arabic and Islamic Thought," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/arabic-islamic-causation/. For al-Ghazali's critique of causality, see this meticulous and informative essay Hans Daiber, "God versus Causality Al-Ghazali's Solution and Its Historical Background," in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazali. Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary. Vol. I*, ed. Georges Tamer (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), 1–22.

172 Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-yi Ru'yaha-yi Rasulani-5 Shabi bar Nishast az Falak dar Guzasht [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-5 One Night Riding Forth, He Passed Heaven's Lofty Sphere]," *Jaras (Jonbish-I Rah-I Sabz)*, January 6, 2014, http://www.rahesabz.net/story/83167/.

173 Q. 17: 1, 53: 8-18. For difficulties surrounding the relevance of verses 8 to 18 of sura al-Najm (53) to ascension, see Josef van Ess, "Vision and Ascension: Surat al-Najm and its Relationship with Muhammad's Mi'raj," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 47–62. For a more general discussion covering the difficulties surrounding all verses deemed to be related to ascension, see Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn Abbas Ascension Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), Ch. 1. See also Christiane Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension: A Persian-Sunni Devotional Tale* (London/New York: I B Tauris, 2010), 4–9.

of how the subtleties of religious literature can be used to create powerful confessional and communal boundaries.'[174]

The 'Arabic word *mi'raj* (p. *ma'arij*), literally means 'ladder', is not used in its singular form in the Qur'an, while its plural form is used only twice in the Qur'an,[175] none of which appears to be specifically related to Muhammad's ascension. The basic tale of ascension, in one of its form that has found ascendancy among Muslims, is rather simple. While sleeping in his hometown Mecca the angel Gabriel awakened Muhammad by knocking on the door, and informing him that the time had come for him to see God. A heavenly creature brought Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem form where he ascended to heaven. At each level of heaven Muhammad would meet and talk to numerous angels and previous prophets. He would also observe paradise and hell. Finally, Muhammad would visit God alone at His throne. At this meeting, after some negotiations the number of five obligatory prayers for Muslims would be agreed between Muhammad and God.

The story of the ascension, despite all difficulties around it, came to gain ascendency among Muslims and became a prominent part of Muhammad's biography, especially due to these three reasons: 1- the story shows, in all its Sunni and Shi'i forms, the unique status of Muhammad among other prophets such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus; 2-it paved the way for Muslims to establish the sanctuary of Jerusalem, 3- it helped to finally set the number of obligatory daily prayers at five.[176]

Now, let us get back to Soroush, and how he interprets the night journey and ascension in favour of his dream theory of the Qur'anic revelation. Soroush states that resurrection has been almost unanimously taken by Muslims, except for philosophers, to be bodily and not merely spiritual.[177] Regarding Muhammad's night journey and ascension, Soroush asserts that most of the commentators take the night journey to be bodily, but they disagree over whether the ascension is bodily or merely spiritual. The ascension has also been construed by most Sunni and Shi'i commentators to be bodily.

Soroush then makes a paraphrased quote of Tabataba'i, the direct quotation of which is: '… some [early] Shi'is inclined to take Muhammad's ascension to be [merely] spiritual and some later Shi'is have [also] inclined to it' (brackets added).[178] Soroush takes Tabata'i himself to be inclined to this position. Soroush also refers, without specific reference, to the famous Qur'anic

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174 Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the Mi'raj in the Formation of Islam* (New York/London: Routledge, 2005), 14.
175 Q. 43: 33, 70: 3.
176 Frederick S. Colby, "Night Journey," in *Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of God (2 Vols.),* ed. C. Fitzpatrick and A. Walker, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 2: 422.
177 For an overview of classical and modern interpretations of resurrection among Muslims, see Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
178 Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, 1997, 19: 37.

commentator al-Alusi (1802-1854), an Iraqi Sunni exegete and jurist, who in his commentary of the Quran, *Ruh al-Ma'ni* (The Spirit of Intentions), mentions a marginal view among Sunnis to the effect that while Muhammad's night journey was bodily, his ascension was spiritual. However, it was not spiritual in the Sufi sense of the term, according to which his spirit went to heaven, while his body remained where it was, but in the sense that it was the 'dream of heart' (*ru'ya al-qalb*).[179] Soroush brings to the fore this marginal view to show the diversity of ideas about the nature of the night journey and ascension among Muslims, and that his position is not without precedent in the history of Muslim thought.

Soroush then goes back to Tabataba'i while bringing a long direct quotation from him to the effect that Muhammad's ascension could have been spiritual, but not in the sense of the dream of heart, rather in the sense of his spirit's journey to the heaven.[180] This position is relatively good for Soroushian theory, but not good enough. He refers then to 'the Book of Ascent' (*mi'raj nama*), a Persian treatise attributed to Ibn Sina (Avicenna).

Ibn Sina categorically denies both the bodily night journey, and the ascension of Muhammad, taking both to be an 'intellectual journey'.[181] Ibn Sina seems to be denying even the spiritual journey of the prophet Muhammad in the sense of his spirit's journey to heaven, since Ibn Sina explains that what Muhammad reports of his ascension like seeing God or searing on Buraq should be interpreted allegorically: 'Muhammad's ascension is not sensory (*hissi*) but it is intellectual mystery (*raz-i ma'qul*) that is told symbolically (*ramzyar*) in the sensory term'.[182] Soroush quotes the last part of Ibn Sina's account of what Muhammad told of his own ascension: 'When I did all this, I returned to the house. Because of the swiftness of the journey, the bedclothes were still warm.'[183] Ibn Sina then interprets all sensory details of ascension allegorically, taking, for instance, Buraq as an allegorical allusion to the Active Intelligence (*'aql-i fa"al*).[184]

At the end of this essay Soroush, himself a poet, mentions a few lines of his own long ode in praise of the prophet Muhammad. In it he portrays Muhammad as a bird that flies around his own dreams seeing God's throne and angels in himself: 'wing in wing with the angels watching the apostles/you are the bird of the divine rose garden and you yourself are the flightdrome'.[185] Soroush regards the phenomenology of ascension as being central in making sense of the Qur'anic

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[179] Abu al-Fadl Shihab al-Din al-Sayyid Mahmud al-Alusi, *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al- 'Azim wa al-Sab' al-Mathani (The Spirit of Intentions),* 30 Vol. (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1985), 15: 7.
[180] Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, 1997, 13: 32.
[181] Abu 'Ali al-Husain Ibn Sina, *Mi'raj Nama [The Book of Ascent], with a Revised Text by Shams al-Din Ibrahim Abarquhi*, ed. Najib Mayel Heravi (Mashhad: The Islamic Research Foundation, Astan-i Quds-i Razavi, 1986), 119.
[182] Ibid., 95.
[183] The translation is taken from Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina): with a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 213.
[184] Ibn Sina, *The Book of Ascent*, 103.
[185] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 5."

revelation as a whole, because 'the visual and dream language of the Qur'an is clearly a sequel to the visual and dream experience of ascension'.[186] Soroush makes the promise that he will elaborate on the connection between ascension and resurrection by devoting an essay to this issue, but this essay has so far not been published.

Less than two years after publishing the fifth part of the article series entitled 'Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams', Soroush engaged in a TV debate over his theory of revelation with Abdolali Bazargan (b. 1943), an Iranian politician, public intellectual, and scholar of Qur'anic studies who is the son of Mahdi Bazargan. The debate was held by the BBC Persian TV debate program 'Pargar', and broadcast in two parts on 3 and 10 May 2016, and it very soon went viral.[187] Though the debate contains objections and defences much of which were discussed earlier within this thesis, the debate also contains some new emphases and reformulations, and therefore it is worth a quick review.

The starting point of his theory, Soroush remarks, was based on some reports about what Soroush describes as 'unusual moods' the prophet underwent when the incident of revelation would happen to him; like going to sleep, or heavier than sleep in such a way that he would become totally detached and unaware of his surroundings while he was sweating. Even when the unusual mood would pass, he had to pass some further time until he had returned to normal.[188] Soroush concludes that the Qur'an does not belong to the waking realm, but to the dream realm. Phenomenologically, he adds, there are numerous Qur'anic verses in which it seems to be the case that the prophet does not retell the story he received, rather he reports what he saw in a dream. Moreover, there is some liturgical literature in the Qur'an, such as the first chapter of the Qur'an 'Fatiha', and since God does not pray, they should come from the prophet. Confronted again with the common objection that the Qur'an has frequently addressed Muhammad, and given him commands, Soroush reiterates the rejoinder[189] that these are literary techniques that can be found, among others, in the poems of Rumi or Sa'di.

Though Bazargan admits that in the Qur'an many of the prophets of the past are depicted as receiving revelation through 'dream' (*ru'ya*), he believes there is no single verse in the Qur'an depicting Muhammad as the one narrating what he saw in his dreams. In the Qur'an, God speaks

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186 Ibid.

187 Abdolkarim Soroush and Abdolali Bazargan, "Qur'an: The Prophet's Dreams? Part One," *Pargar* (Los Angeles: BBC Persian TV, May 3, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBSXNMc3q_Y. Abdolkarim Soroush and Abdolali Bazargan, "Qur'an: The Prophet's Dreams? Part Two," *Pargar* (Los Angeles: BBC Persian TV, May 10, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBSXNMc3q_Y.

188 It is reported from 'Aisha, one of the wives of the prophet, that 'I saw the Prophet being inspired (Divinely) and (noticed) the sweat dropping from his forehead on a very cold day as the Revelation was over.' Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari, the Translation of Meanings*, 1: 46.

189 I have already covered his response in detail above.

not Muhammad, and sometimes God addresses Muhammad, and at other times God addresses people. By frequently using the expression that 'What will explain to you' (*wa ma adraka*) the Qur'an even sometimes addresses Muhammad, reminding him that he has a limited knowledge.[190]

Soroush accepts that there is no single verse in the Qur'an indicating that the prophet was seeing what he was saying in the form of the Qur'anic revelation. But it does not undermine his theory. Relying on his epistemological theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge he posits that analysing the Qur'anic revelation is determined by, *inter alia*, our metaphysical, anthropological, and hermeneutical presuppositions. These are *pre*suppositions in the sense that they are logically prior to our understanding of the text as a revealed text, in such a way that our understanding of the text is based upon them. Soroush argues that even if the Qur'an were explicitly endorsing that Muhammad delivered what was delivered to him as revelation still we would need to presuppose Muhammad is trustworthy. These presuppositions cannot be critiqued by appealing to the text itself. Rather, paratextual considerations are to be taken into account when critiquing a theory of revelation.

Soroush again is faced with this common objection that while revelation is regarded as epistemologically a reliable source of knowledge which has probative force, the dream is not a candidate for a reliable source of knowledge, therefore it lacks probative force. Consequently, reducing revelation to dream is going to diminish its epistemological significance. Dream could also be, Soroush responds, a source of knowledge. Whether we take it as an infallible or fallible source of knowledge, however, depends on our presuppositions.

As revelation might be in principle fallible but one might, from a religious point of view, take Muhammad's revelation to be immune to error and an exception to the rule, one might take the position that while a dream is in principle fallible, Muhammad's dream is infallible. But he is quick to add that while the dream theory of revelation is in principle neutral as to whether or not Muhammad is immune to error, he does not take Muhammad as being infallible. Muhammad is human, and the Qur'an endorses the humanity of Muhammad.[191] Muhammad's dream was deeply influenced by the era in which he lived, and his historical epoch naturally had its own limitations reflected in the Qur'anic revelation.

Soroush then once again alludes to the traditional theological problem of God's speech, asking Bazargan 'how could a dimensionless (*bi jahat*), wholly other (*bi misl*) and incorporeal God speaks to his apostle?'[192] We already devoted a chapter to this problem reviewing and categorizing different responses to this issue. The main problem, to put it in a nutshell, is that speaking in human

[190] Such as 'What will explain to you what the Inevitable Hour (*haghgha*) is?', Q. 69: 3.
[191] 'Say, 'I am only a human being, like you, to whom it has been revealed that your God is One.' Q. 18: 110, 41: 6.
[192] Soroush and Bazargan, "Qur'an: The Prophet's Dreams? Part One."

form requires dimensionality, corporeality, and similarity between God and human, while God is usually depicted as transcendent, implying at least according to one interpretation, that even if God speaks, God's speech would be totally different from human speech.

What is specifically new in this debate is that Soroush probably for the first time goes one step further taking some of the Qur'anic legislations as being rooted not in Muhammad's revelatory dreams, but rather in his non-dream experiences. The example he makes is prayer. Soroush thinks prayer might have been rooted in Muhammad's seclusion and retreat in the cave of Hira before his prophecy. Soroush however immediately adds that in giving advice based on his own personal non-revelatory experience to his followers to perform prayer, Muhammad was always certain that God endorses and approves his ritual advice.

Soroush then argues that his theory of revelation can be better defended if taken as a theory based on a form of reasoning called 'inference to the best explanation' (IBE for short), or alternatively called abduction. Due to the significance of abduction for the justification that Soroush suggests for his theory of the Qur'anic revelation it is worth dwelling on it for a moment.

Abduction is usually contrasted with two other forms of inferences: deduction and induction. One way to put the difference between these three forms of inference is that deduction is a necessary form of inference, while induction and abduction are not. Deduction is a necessary form of inference in the sense that if the premises of a deductive inference are true, and the form of inference is valid, this then guarantees the truth of the conclusion. Put it another way, in such a situation the conclusion cannot be untrue. For example:

p. 1- A is bigger than B,
p. 2- B is bigger than C,
C.- A is bigger than C.

Here if premises 1 and 2 are true, given the validity of the inference the conclusion has to be true. But this is not the case with inductive and abductive inferences. The premises of inductive and abductive inferences might be true, but they do not entail the truth of the conclusion. Put it another way, the conclusion does not already contain logically in the premises of abductive and inductive inferences, while it does so in a successful deductive inference.

What marks the difference between inductive and abductive inference is that the induction can be characterized, for our purpose, as being only based on statistical data or observed frequencies and not explanatory considerations, while abduction is based on implicit or explicit appealing to explanatory considerations, rather than at least *explicit* appealing to statistics. An example of inductive reasoning is:

P. 1- Simon is living in Kensington Palace Gardens, central London,

P. 2- People living in Kensington Palace Gardens are rich,

C. Simon is rich.

Unlike deductive reasoning, in the above argument given the truth of premises, the truth of the conclusion is not guaranteed. Simon might be a poor student looking desperately for a job, and the only job he could find is to work as a caretaker in a big house in Kensington Palace Gardens which is going to be empty for six months each year, since its owner lives six months of each year abroad. Then, although Simon is living in one of the most expensive areas in London, he is not rich.

Abductive reasoning, as mentioned above, is not a necessary form of reasoning. It is also not purely based on statistical data or observed frequencies as induction is, rather it is mainly based on explanatory considerations, though it might implicitly appeal to statistical data or observed frequencies. In abduction, we make an assumption that compared to other explanations, which if it turns out to be true, better explains the available data. The best explanation of a simple example of inference is:

> Walking along the beach, you see what looks like a picture of Winston Churchill in the sand. It could be that [...] what you see is actually the trace of an ant crawling on the beach. The much simpler, and therefore (you think) much better, explanation is that someone intentionally drew a picture of Churchill in the sand.[193]

Here the assumption that someone intentionally drew a picture of Churchill, compared to an alternative explanation (such as an ant crawling on the beach) better explains what looks like a picture of Winston Churchill in the sand. Here observed frequencies might also be implicitly appealed to, for one might frequently have seen people drawing pictures in the sand.[194] But under what conditions is an explanation the best explanation? When deciding between two or more explanations or theories, in the development of the best explanation, the appeal is usually made to theoretical virtues such as simplicity, elegance, unification, strength, explanatory fecundity, generality, and coherence with well-established theories. Simplicity, which is sometimes taken to

[193] Igor Douven, "Abduction," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/abduction/.

[194] It is noteworthy that 'inference to the best explanation' more accurately is 'inference to the best of the available competing explanations, when the best one is sufficiently good.' Peter Lipton, "Inference to the Best Explanation," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Science*, ed. Stathis Psillos and Martin Curd, second edition (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), 228.

be one of the most important theoretical virtues,[195] primarily means ontological parsimony. All other things being equal, theories or explanations that postulate fewer objects are to be preferred.[196]

Soroush maintains that his abductive theory of the Qur'anic revelation is preferable to the 'orthodox' theory because his theory does not require postulating God to explain the *content* of revelation, and therefore it is simpler than the 'orthodox' theory. Moreover, it is simpler in yet another aspect. The dream theory of revelation would free us from a huge number of 'ad hoc' explanations that one needs to bring to bear to solve 'inconsistencies' involved in the Qur'an. By taking all these 'inconsistencies' to be happening in dream Soroush could come up with a simpler solution to this problem. Soroush makes this example that while the Qur'an had not yet become the form of a book, the Qur'an refers to itself as a book.[197] The simplest interpretation would be to say that Muhammad saw in a dream that his revelation would be reserved in a book form.

The simplicity is also related to another theoretical virtue: comprehensiveness. The theory of dream, Soroush claims, can explain in a comprehensive manner a huge number of problems such as 'inconsistences', while the 'orthodox' theory of revelation needs to appeal to a number of auxiliary theories to explain them away. Another theoretical virtue Soroush claims for his theory is unification. While, for example, resurrection seems not to be closely related to Muhammad's ascension, the dream theory takes resurrection to be the continuation of the dream experience of ascension, and thereby unifies two seemingly disparate phenomena.

Bazargan, at least initially, admits that 'when it comes to the Qur'anic verses related to the resurrection and afterlife I have no problem with the dream interpretation'.[198] But when the Qur'anic verse are related to, what Bazargan describes as, 'every day and clear issues' mentioned in the Qur'an, there is no need for the dream interpretation. One argument he sets out against the wholesale dream theory of Soroush is that Muhammad was *Ummi*, a term that is commonly interpreted as 'illiterate' or 'unlettered', that is not being able to read and write.[199] An illiterate man could not provide the deep and rich wisdom the Qur'an presents. This must come from somewhere else, and that is from God.

Soroush disagrees: firstly, he remarks that some doubts have been cast upon whether *ummi* is to be interpreted as illiterate. 'Good' scholarship, Soroush says, carried out showing that *ummi*

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[195] '[S]ome philosophers just stipulate that they will take 'simplicity' as shorthand for whatever package of theoretical virtues is (or ought to be) characteristic of rational inquiry'. Alan Baker, "Simplicity," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/simplicity/.

[196] M. B. Willard, "Paradigms and Philosophical Progress," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophical Methods*, ed. Chris Daly (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 119ff.

[197] See, e.g., Q. 2: 2.

[198] Soroush and Bazargan, "Qur'an: The Prophet's Dreams? Part Two."

[199] *Ummi* is a Qur'anic term used, both in singular and plural forms, six times in the Qur'an, in some of which the prophet Muhammad is described as such, see 2: 78, 3: 20 & 75, 7: 157 & 8, 62: 2.

means 'unscriptured', or 'gentile', as opposed to the people of the book (*ahl al-kitab*). Therefore, ummi does not mean illiterate, but it means the one coming from a nation or people who do not (or at least not yet) have divine scripture.[200] Secondly, Soroush goes on to argue that even if *ummi* is to be taken as illiterate, illiteracy is not tantamount to being unwise and ignorant. Muhammad was a wise and knowledgeable person, having a 'creative imagination' (*khiyal-i khallaq*), even if he was illiterate.

A few days after the debate was broadcast, Bazargan published a short article listing his ten critical points against the Soroushian dream theory of the Qur'anic revelation.[201] The main claim of Bazargan is that at least viewing from the perspective that the Qur'an describes itself, the dream theory is not defensible, because:

1- The language of the dream is a symbolic language requiring esoteric and allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*). This language by nature is mysterious and ambiguous, whereas the Qur'an is 'a scripture that makes thing clear' (*kitab mubin*).[202] Though in some rare cases God gave special knowledge to Muhammad through dreams, they are exceptions and by no means central to Muhammad's divine mission.[203]

2- In the dream theory of the Qur'anic revelation, the status of 'divine mission' (*risalat*), attributed to the prophet and reflected in the Qur'an, is rendered redundant and superfluous.

3- The 'challenge' (*tahaddi*) verses of the Qur'an invite doubters and disbelievers to challenge the Qur'an by producing something similar to the Qur'an.[204] It is not clear how to make sense of this challenge if the dream theory is taken to be defensible. Given this theory, should someone bring a dream similar to the Qur'anic dream or a speech similar to it?

4- The Qur'an frequently uses the terms '*nuzul*' and '*tanzil*' (sending down). The terms denote that God simplified the divine message in order to make it more understandable for

[200] See in this regards Isaiah Goldfeld, "The Illiterate Prophet (Nabi Ummi) An Inquiry into the Development of a Dogma in Islamic Tradition," *Der Islam* 57 (1980): 58–76; Norman Calder, "The 'Ummi' in Early Islamic Juristic Literature," *Der Islam* 67, no. 1 (1990): esp. 111–16; Sebastian Günther, "Muhammad, the Illiterate Prophet: An Islamic Creed in the Qur'an and Qur'anic Exegesis," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2002): 1–26.

[201] Abdolali Bazargan, "Dah Nukti Dar Naqd-i Nazariyy-yi Ru'ya-yi Rasulani [Ten Critical Points against the Theory of Prophetic Dream]," *BBC Persian*, May 12, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/persian/blogs/2016/05/160512_l44_nazeran_sorush_bazergan.

[202] For the frequent usage of *kitab mubin* in the Qur'an See, e.g. 5: 15, 6: 59, 10: 61.

[203] Bazargan makes two examples in this regard. One is Muhammad's dream about entering Mecca in security while before that Muslims had barred from entering it (Q. 48: 27). The other is usually interpreted as the dream that the prophet of Islam received on the Night Journey (Q. 17: 60). In both verses the term *ru'ya* (dream or vision) is used.

[204] See, e.g. Q. 2: 23.

all.[205] Despite all the Qur'anic emphases on God's simplifying the Qur'an for the better understanding of humanity the dream theory gives all credit to Muhammad depicting him as a messenger who understands God, with all the burden of epochal and anthropological limitations he would bear.

5- According to the dream theory Muhammad intentionally narrates his waking and dream states as if a traveller speaks about the events of his or her journey; but in the Qur'an Muhammad is portrayed as the messenger who is not allowed to alter what is revealed to him:

> When Our clear revelations are recited to them, those who do not expect to meet with Us say, 'Bring [us] a different Qur'an, or change it.' [Prophet], say, 'It is not for me to change it of my own accord; I only follow what is revealed to me.[206]

6- The Qur'anic revelation is sent to warn and guide people into the truth.[207] But if the Qur'an is characterized as Muhammad's dreams, however sublime they might have been, it is far from clear how the Qur'an as a dream can bring warning and guidance to people. The problem is augmented if one considers the difficulties of deciphering the dreams.

7- Numerical researches carried out in recent decades have proved the mathematical miracle of the Qur'an. This mathematical miracle of the Qur'an is not explicable by the dream theory, a theory that gives all credits to Muhammad himself. Neither Muhammad nor any of his contemporaries were capable of producing a book full of numerical inimitabilities.[208]

8- The strategy of Soroush, according to Bazargan, is to explicate the dream nature of the Qur'anic verses that are related to the resurrection and ascension in the Qur'an, and then by extension to reach this conclusion that the Qur'an *as a whole* is to be characterized as bearing the dream nature. Though Bazargan initially, as mentioned above, stated that he

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[205] Though neither *nuzul* nor *tanzil* are used in this verse, Bazargan could have quoted it: 'We have made it easy to learn lessons from the Quran' (54: 40).

[206] Q. 10: 15.

[207] A Qur'anic verse, among others, that Bazargan quotes is 'Truly, this Quran has been sent down by the Lord of the Worlds: The Trustworthy Spirit brought it down to your heart [Prophet], so that you could bring warning' (Q. 26: 192-4).

[208] The claim to numerical miracle of the Qur'an is notoriously associated with an Egyptian-American biochemist Rashad Khalifa (1935-1990). Khalifa claimed the key to the mathematical miracle of the Qur'an is the prime number 19. There are so many complex but regular occurrences and multiples of 19 that establish definitive proof of the divine origins of the Qur'an. Khalifa, however, claimed for himself messengerhood (*risala*) though not prophethood (*nubuwwa*) after the prophet Muhammad. He was stabbed to death by a convert Muslim in the kitchen of the mosque he founded in Tucson, Arizona. See Rashad Khalifa, *Computer Speaks: God's Message to the World* (Tucson: Islamic Productions, 1981). For a review of Khalifa's works and his tragic death, see Naveeda Khan, "Nineteen, a Story," *Anthropological Theory* 10, no. 1–2 (2010): 112–22. For a concise critique of his works, see Martin Gardner, "The Numerology of Dr. Rashad Khalifa," *The Skeptical Inquirer* 21, no. 5 (1997): 16.

had no problem with the dream interpretation when only applied to the Qur'anic verses related to the resurrection and afterlife, he now claims that even in these verses there is no need to appeal to the dream interpretation, rather we can use the classical hermeneutical tools known as 'decisive' or 'clear' (*muhkam*, pl. *muhkamat*) versus 'ambiguous' or 'allegorical' (*mutashabih,* pl. *mutashabihat*) already available to us in the exegetical tradition. The dichotomy between *muhkam* and *mutashabih* is rooted in the Qur'an and reads:

> It is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning [*muhkamat*]–these are the cornerstone of the Scripture–and others are ambiguous [*mutashabihat*]'. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning. Those firmly grounded in knowledge [*rasikhun fi al-'ilm*] say, 'We believe in it: it is all from our Lord'–only those with real perception will take heed– (the last three brackets added).[209]

Bazargan claims that the Qur'anic verses regarding the resurrection and ascension belong to the ambiguities of the Qur'an due to their analogical and allegorical language. Therefore, there is no need to appeal to the theory of dream to make sense of them.[210]

9- Dream interpretation is irrelevant and alien to the interpretation of the Qur'an. The expression 'Dream interpretation' is used only once in the Qur'an, and even that refers to the interpretation that a pharaoh asked for his own dream.[211] Therefore, using dream interpretation to make sense of the Qur'anic revelation is an exegetical 'illegal innovation' (*bid'a*).

10- As chapter three, verse seven of the Qur'an, mentioned above stipulates, only God knows the real meaning of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an and even those 'firmly grounded in knowledge' (*rasikhun fi al-'ilm*) confess their lack of knowledge in this regard. Bazargan implies that if the verses related to the resurrection and ascension belong to ambiguities we are not supposed, from the Qur'anic perspective, to theorize in any form about them, including the dream theory of revelation.

The main point Bazargan tries to prove by making all these remarks is that the Qur'an does not endorse the dream theory of revelation.

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[209] Q. 3: 7.

[210] Bazargan is not alone in taking the details of the resurrection and conditions of afterlife mentioned in the Qur'an to be instances of ambiguous verses. That is common among exegetes in the past and present. See in this regards Leah Kinberg, "Muhkamat and Mutashabihat (Koran 3/7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis," *Arabica* 35, no. 2 (1988): 155–57.

[211] Though Bazargan did not specify to what verse he is alluding, the reference could be to 'The king said, 'I dreamed about seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones; seven green ears of corn and [seven] others withered. Counsellors, if you can interpret dreams, tell me the meaning of my dream.' (Q. 12: 43).

Around two weeks later Soroush published a response to the Bazargan's critiques. This constituted the last part of his article series with the fixed title 'Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams'.[212] Soroush first enumerates the problems that he thinks the 'orthodox' theory of the Qur'anic revelation—in some cases for centuries and in other cases from the modern time onward—has been grappling with:

1- The problem of God's speech (how could God, who is transcendent, speak to the prophets?),

2- The historicity of the Qur'an (especially the thoroughgoing 'Arabness of the Qur'an),

3- The overt conflict between some modern scientific theories and some Qur'anic verses. Soroush here alludes to some Qur'anic verses reflecting ancient astronomical and medical beliefs without mentioning that with what scientific theories they might conflict.[213]

4- Some legal rulings of the Qur'an that are in conflict with justices and human dignity or involve excessive violent punishments, such as hand and foot amputation,[214] forcible removal of eye as retaliation,[215] and the permission of slavery.[216]

5- The rhetorical rise and fall of the Qur'anic language that led some exegetes to appeal to *sarfa* to explain it.[217]

6- The anthropomorphic, and more specifically the anthropopathic (a God who shares human emotions), characterization of God in the Qur'an.

The judgment of Soroush is that 'as long as we directly see the hand of God in the Qur'an and take Muhammad in his revelatory experience as being purely passive
and consider the Qur'an as the product of God's omniscience, these problems will never be resolved'.[218] He thinks, however, that all these problems can be solved by his dream theory of the Qur'anic revelation. It is Muhammad as a human with all his natural limitations who speaks in the Qur'an.

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[212] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-yi Ru'yaha-yi Rasulani-6 Zihi Maratib-i Khabi ki bih zi Bidiari-st [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-6 Oh Excellent! When the Stage of Sleeping Better than the (Stage of) Waking Is]," *BBC Persian*, May 29, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/persian/blogs/2016/05/160525_l44_nazeran_sorush_bazargan.

[213] Such as 'the seven heavens' in Q. 17: 44 and 23: 86, and that semen production takes place between the backbone and the ribs, 86: 4-7 or that the stars in the lowest heaven are to prevent rebellious devil from eavesdropping on the Higher Assembly and 'if any [of them] stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame' (Q. 37: 10).

[214] Q. 5: 38.

[215] Q. 5: 45.

[216] Q. 2: 178.

[217] For *sarfa* see above.

[218] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 6."

The historicity of the Qur'an is then entirely natural, and the same is true of the conflict between the ancient astronomical and medical beliefs reflected in the Qur'an, and the stablished modern scientific theories. The—as it were—'Muhammadanity' of the Qur'anic revelation in a similar way explains the rhetorical rise and fall of the Qur'anic language. Like an accomplished poet who is not always in his/her utmost eloquent temperament a prophet might be in different psychological moods, the outcome of which could be the rhetorical rise and fall in the language of the Qur'an.

This is presented, Soroush claims, as a reasonable interpretation of a key Qur'anic verse, which means a lot to him: 'Say, I am only a human being, like you, to whom it has been revealed that your God is One'.[219] That the Qur'an is rooted in divine revelation is for Soroush a faith-based proposition, for which he is not going to provide a rational justification. His main concern is rather to provide a framework to help make sense of 'I am only a human being' part of the above-mentioned verse.

After recapitulation of his argument he then turns to Bazargan's points and responds to them one by one:

1- Regarding the critical point that the language of dreams is mysterious, whereas the Qur'an is a clear scripture, Soroush actually responds that the Qur'an is not clear. There are innumerable and irreducible differences among exegetes about the interpretation of almost each and every verse of the Qur'an, including whether and which part of the Qur'an is 'clear' (*muhkam*) and which part is 'ambiguous' (*mutashabih*).

2- Regarding the point that in dream theory 'divine mission' (*risalat*) becomes redundant and superfluous, so that no one is ready to die for a mysterious dream, Soroush responds that martyrs in the early Islam had access to the non-Qur'anic speeches of Muhammad which were less ambiguous.

3- As to the third point that the Qur'an claims that no one could bring a book like the Qur'an while in the dream theory this challenge is ruled out, Soroush makes this rejoinder that the Qur'anic challenge still make sense in the dream theory. It is like saying whether or not anyone could bring lyrics like Hafiz, despite the fact that many poets tried and failed.

4- Concerning the point that the Qur'anic words '*nuzul*' and '*tanzil*' no longer make sense in dream theory, Soroush's answer is that they make perfect sense in the dream theory. God who is formless (*bi surat*), i.e. beyond any form, takes form through and in Muhammad's dream, and this is *nuzul* and *tanzil* or sending down or simplification. This

[219] Q. 18: 110, 41: 6.

sending down is not spatial rather it is metaphorical, namely God who is not comprehensible in His/Her/Its formlessness becomes comprehensible through taking form in Muhammad's dreams as reflected in the Qur'an.

5- Regarding the objection that Muhammad is portrayed in the Qur'an as the messenger who is not allowed to alter what is revealed to him, while in the dream theory Muhammad is free to do whatever he wants to do with his dreams, the response Soroush provides is vague and very short. He says the prophet was not authorized to change divine revelation, but this belongs to the unconscious phase of revelation to which Muhammad had no direct access. Otherwise even abrogation in the Qur'an takes place in Muhammad's revelatory dreams.[220]

6- Regarding the objection that if the nature of divine revelation is taken to be of the dream kind then the Qur'anic revelation ceases to be the book of warning and guiding people into the truth, Soroush's response is that dreams can also contain truth, warning and guiding people into the truth. He specifically points to Joseph's and Abraham's true dreams mentioned in the Qur'an.[221]

7- Regarding the objection that the mathematical miracle of the Qur'an cannot be explained in terms of dream theory, the response that Soroush provides is that the dream is a theory about the *mechanism* of revelation, while mathematical miracle is a theory about the *outcome* of revelation. Though Soroush seems to be unsympathetic to the mathematical miracle of the Qur'an, he claims that the dream theory as a mechanism related theory can be, in principle, reconciled with the mathematical miracle theory as a theory of outcome, in the sense that the outcome of revelatory dream could be, in principle, mathematically miraculous.

8- To the objection that dream theory draws mainly on the Qur'anic verses related to the resurrection and therefore, if applicable, it could only be applied to the resurrection verses and not to the whole Qur'an, Soroush refers to his lengthy response at the beginning

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[220] Abrogation (*naskh*) technically means the cancelation of one ruling by a subsequent ruling. It is widely, but not unanimously, believed that abrogation occurred in the Qur'an. The reference is usually to a Qur'anic verse (2: 106) which seems to be talking about the abrogation of the Qur'anic verses by better or similar verses. There is, however, a minority among Muslims scholars in the past and present who deny the occurrence of abrogation in the Qur'an. Among those who subscribe to its occurrence, there is a disagreement as to the extent to which it is abrogated, and also specific verses that are taken to be abrogated. The range of disagreement is between more than two hundred verses being abrogated to only one verse. There are different ways of abrogation, and different categories of abrogated verses. For a short review, with a view on the relevance of abrogation to contemporary reinterpretation of the ethico-legal content of the Qur'an, see Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2006), Ch. 7. For a detailed study, see Louay Fatoohi, *Abrogation in the Qur'an and Islamic Law: A Critical Study of the Concept of "Naskh" and Its Impact* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[221] For Joseph's dreams, as mentioned in the Qur'an, see Q. 12: 4ff. For Abraham's dream in the Qur'an, see Q. 37: 102.

of this rejoinder that the dream theory can be used to make sense of God's actions and attributes, Qur'anic mythology, rhetoric, regulations and prayers and therefore should be applied to the Qur'an as a whole.

What is specifically new in Soroush's response to Bazargan is the claim that his theory can better explain a rhetorical technique used in the Qur'an, where a sudden shift is made in the pronoun of the speaker. This is known as *iltifat*, literally means to turn one's face to. While *iltifat* is taken by Muslim literary and exegetical scholars to be a powerful stylistic mode and an eloquent technique,[222] Soroush takes it to be a sign of the dream nature of the Qur'an:

> Transition from first person to second person, and sometimes from second person to first person is an incident that really would take place in Muhammad's conscience and imagination. This is not a skilful linguistic adoration and decoration. The fusion of the speaker and the audience-observer can well be seen in the cases of *iltifat*.[223]

One case of *iltifat* in the Qur'an that Soroush quotes is

> It is God who sends the winds, bearing good news of His coming grace, and when they have gathered up the heavy clouds, We drive them to a dead land where We cause rain to fall, bringing out all kinds of crops, just as We shall bring out the dead.[224]

Here there occurs the change of speaker from third-person singular (God) to first-person plural. To Soroush, this change shows the phenomenological closeness of the prophet to God in such a way that in his dream 'sometimes God speaks on the behalf of Muhammad and sometime Muhammad speaks on the behalf of God'.[225]

9- As to this objection that dream is alien to the Qur'an since it is not mentioned in the Qur'an in the sense Soroush uses the term, and hence this theory is an exegetical 'illegal innovation' (*bid'a*), Soroush responds that it is like saying because 'hermeneutics' is not used in the Qur'an it would be illegal innovation to use hermeneutical theories to interpret the Qur'an.

10- Regarding the objection that only God knows the real meaning of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an therefore human beings are not supposed to interpret them while dream theory of revelation claims to decipher these verses, Soroush responds that the

[222] M. A. S. Abdel Abdel Haleem, "Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purposes: 'Iltifat' and Related Features in the Qur'an," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 55, no. 3 (1992): 407–32.
[223] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 6."
[224] Q. 7: 57.
[225] Soroush, "Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams 6."

distinction between permissible and impermissible interpretation has been a matter of continuous and unending debate among exegetes. Moreover, the dream theory tries to provide a theoretical framework out of which one might make sense of the phenomenon of revelation. It is not aimed at interpreting the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an.

5.4 Summary and Conclusion

In his epistemology of religion, explained in the previous chapter, Soroush defended the possibility, inevitability, and desirability of the reinterpretation of religion in the light of modern scientific and philosophical frameworks. In his theory of religion, also explained in the previous chapter, he analysed the core of religion in terms of religious experience.

Based upon his epistemology and theory of religion, Soroush develops his own theory of the Qur'anic revelation. His theory has, so far, gone through two different but seemingly completing phases: in the first phase, the emphasis is placed on the Qur'anic revelation as not being God's speech in the literal sense of the term, but Muhammad's own speech. His back-and-forth dialogues with a Shi'i marja' Ja'far Sobhani further developed the first phase of his theory of the Qur'anic revelation.

In the second phase, he goes one step further analysing Muhammad's speech as stemming from dream experience. While in the first phase his emphasis was on the Qur'anic revelation being Muhammadan speech, in the second phase he analyses Muhammadan speech in terms of being based on dream experience. He was also extensively engaged in responding to his lay, and cleric critics. What is common in all his responses to his critics, is an effort to show that his ideas, for all their 'non-orthodox' nature, are neither alien to, nor detached from the history of Muslim theologies and philosophies.

Now that I have sketched out his theory of the Qur'anic revelation in this chapter, with a view to employing what we have discussed so far, the time has come to critically, that is philosophically, analyse his theory. This will be dealt with in the next chapter.

6. The Soroushian Theory of Revelation, a Critical Analysis

6.1 Introduction

Firstly, a quick reminder of what has been discussed thus far. After an introduction, we began our intellectual journey by making an effort to delineate in a new and original way the contours of different theories of revelation in the history of Muslim thought. Then I came up with a rather new outline of the realism–irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy. Next, I laid out, what I think to be, the foundations upon which Abdolkarim Soroush, the protagonist of this research, has built his general theory of religion. In yet another chapter, I specifically articulated Soroush's own theory of Qur'anic revelation.

We have now reached the chapter which will represent the—so to speak—beating heart of this research. After passing all these phases, now it is time to critically, that is philosophically, analyse his theory of revelation. For the critical analysis of his theory of revelation, in this chapter first I shall put his theory of revelation within the maze of the different Muslim theories of revelation I already delineated. Then, I shall locate his theory of revelation within the realism–irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy which has also already been presented. After categorizing his theory of revelation in terms of, what I think to be, his location in the history of Muslim theories of revelation, and also in terms of, what I think to be, his location in the realism–irrealism debate, I shall then discuss whether, and to what extent his theory of revelation is philosophically tenable.

But before delving into discussion, a caveat is in order. In order to avoid unnecessary repetitions and also due to the space limitation, I only allude to the points already made in some details in other chapters of this study. This means this chapter does not stand on its own, and attentiveness to the details of other chapters is a desideratum for a full grasp of the subject.

6.2 Soroushian Theory and the Muslim Theories of Revelation

What would be the relation between the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation and different theories of revelation in the history of Muslim theories of revelation I already delineated? In this section, I set about to take up this question comparing and contrasting each and every Muslim theory of revelation, delineated before, with the Soroushian theory of revelation. My main argument, in addition to categorizing his theory, will be that despite the idiosyncrasy usually

attributed to the Soroushian theory of Qur'anic revelation, his theory is not alien to, and detached from the intellectual history of Muslim thought.

6.2.1 Soroushian Theory and the Denial Theory of Revelation

What is the relationship between the denial theory of revelation and the Soroushian theory of revelation? The Soroushian theory of revelation has been frequently criticized as ending up being nothing but the wholesale, yet covert, denial of the prophecy and divine revelation. As a matter of fact, the most socially effective, theoretically rich and detailed kind of this critique is raised not by outsider critics of Soroush (such as conservative jurists), but rather by some of the closest allies and intellectual friends of Soroush himself.

Let me critically consider three similar lines of this kind of criticism raised by Mohsen Kadivar (b. 1959), Iranian religious intellectual and political dissident, Akbar Ganji (b. 1960), Iranian journalist and political dissident, both in self-imposed exile in America, and also Arash Naraghi (b. 1966), another Iranian religious intellectual who is also based in America.

6.2.1.1 Kadivar's and Ganji's Critique of the Soroushian theory of revelation

Mohsen Kadivar, in one of his most outspoken critiques of both Soroush and Shabestari, contends that their religious thinking has gradually become so radicalized that now they can only be characterised as a religious thinker in a highly minimal sense of the term. This bare minimum, Kadivar goes on to say, is merely that they are not materialist. Kadivar's position implies, *inter alia*, that the theory of revelation suggested by Soroush and Shabestari ends up being, in one way or another, the denial theory of revelation and prophecy, even if their intention might not be so. That is why Kadivar, as a religious intellectual with clerical background, complains that the religious intellectualism of Soroush and Shabestari has been 'transubstantiated' (*istihali*) into the secular intellectualism that bears only a very minimum similarity to *bona fide* religious intellectualism.[1]

Unlike Kadivar, who has always been against the Soroushian theory of revelation,[2] Ganji used to support the Soroushian theory of revelation. Between August 2008 and March 2009 in a series of articles entitled 'the Muhammadan Qur'an' (*Qur'an-i Muhammadi*) Ganji wholeheartedly and explicitly defended the Soroushian theory of revelation. Ganji argued that the main tenets of

[1] Mohsen Kadivar, "Ta'ammulati dar-bari-yi Nu-Andishi-yi Dini dar Iran-i Mu 'asir [Reflections on the Contemporary Iranian Religious New-Thinking]," *Kadivar Official Website*, October 22, 2017, http://kadivar.com/?p=14729.
[2] See, for example Mohsen Kadivar, "Nukati Dar Bab-i Mabahis-i Vahy Pazhuhan-i Akhir [Some Remarks Regarding the Recent Discussions by the Theoreticians of Revelation]," *Kadivar Official Website* (blog), March 17, 2008, https://kadivar.com/?p=2995.

Islam, such as the doctrine of the 'finality of prophethood' (*khatamiyyat*), and (moral and cognitive) 'infallibility of prophets and Imams' (*'ismat*) are all just baseless. More importantly, the doctrine of the Qur'an as the God's verbatim speech is not only ungrounded, but clearly false. The Qur'an is Muhammad's own speech which is socially constructed, while deeply reflecting the Seventh Century Arabian *modus vivendi*. More importantly, Ganji was of the view that the Qur'an contains some moral judgments and commands that are not morally acceptable to, at least, modern mentality. [3]

However, seven years later he took a radically different approach towards the Soroushian theory of revelation, considering it to be anything but a 'religious' theory of revelation:

> In the traditional conception of revelation, the personal God chooses an individual and assigns him as a messenger to convey divine messages verbatim to people. In this way, the pillars of prophecy are as follows: a) the personal and anthropomorphic God; b) The speeches of God; c) a prophet; d) the prophetic mission which revolves around conveying the words of the Lord to the people without any indication of error. The Soroushian alternative hypothesis [regarding revelation] eliminates all these elements; only Mohammed and his dreams remain. [According to Soroush] these dreams were the forms that Muhammad put on the Formless [God] and they were/are not necessarily the best forms. (brackets added) [4]

Now Ganji, like Kadivar, argues that the Soroushian theory of revelation eliminates what they take to be the pillars of Islam. Both Kadivar and Ganji take the Soroushian theory of revelation as ending up being a denial theory of revelation, rather than an approval theory of revelation. I disagree; in the following section I argue as to why the Soroushian theory of revelation, however idiosyncratic and 'unorthodox' it might appear, is to be taken as an approval theory of revelation––regardless of whether, and to what extent it is philosophically defensible, which I address later in this chapter.

6.2.1.2 The Critique of Ganji's and Kadivar's Position

In this chapter my first argument for the Soroushian theory of revelation being an approval theory of the Qur'anic revelation is based on a historical comparison. As we saw in chapter two, the key figure of the denial theory of revelation is Zakariyya al-Razi. My main point is that despite some similarities between Soroush and al-Razi, there are certain significant differences between the Soroushian theory of revelation and with that of al-Razi.

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[3] For the first article of these series, see: Akbar Ganji, "Muhammadan Qur'an 1: Rationalism and Fideism (Qur'an-i Muhammadi 1: 'Aql-Girayi va Iman-Girayi)," *Radio Zamaneh* (blog), August 19, 2008, http://zamaaneh.com/idea/2008/08/post_362.html. The whole series in a single PDF can be downloaded from this link: https://mamnoe.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/quran-mohammadi.pdf

[4] Akbar Ganji, "Soroush-Tafsir-i Sukhanan-i Khuda ya Ta'bir-i Ru'yaha-yi Muhammad" [Soroush-An Interpretation of God's Speeches or Muhammad's Dreams], *Radio Zamaneh*, June 20, 2016, https://www.radiozamaneh.com/284153.

Al-Razi believed in a kind of God who never sends prophets or talks through scriptures. Al-Razi's God already provided human beings with reason which is enough for salvation. Religions, however, for al-Razi are inherently dangerous not only because they are fake (for God has never sent down any religion), but also because they constantly fuel bloodshed, false beliefs, and charlatanism. Though Soroush and al-Razi both deny the 'orthodox' theory of divine revelation, as both believe God would not, literally speaking, speak, Soroush believes religions, including Islam, in a different sense, are divine—in the sense that prophets become aware of the divine aspect of their inner life and of the universe, which they cannot help sharing with others, and this is helpful, if not necessary, for human salvation.

Unlike al-Razi, Soroush thinks religions have both unique, and useful functions, whereas for al-Razi religious functions are inherently dangerous. In a lecture under the title 'The Good Functions of Religion' (*khadamat va hasanat-i din*) presented in Tehran's Tarbiat Modares University, in June 1995 and published two years later, Soroush lists six functions he thinks all world religions (and not only Islam) perform.[5] The first function is that religions give cosmic meaning to our life, while without religions it is hard or impossible to figure out our place in the cosmos in a way that would prepare us for a meaningfully bearable life. Soroush is explicit that materialism is incapable of providing a cosmic meaning for people's miseries.[6] This function therefore seems unique. The second function is that religions would facilitate esoteric and mystical experiences. This implies that without religions these kinds of experiences are possible but unlikely, which makes it not a unique but a facilitatory function of religions.[7] The third function, which is related to the second function, is that religions provide a suitable framework within which one can interpret one's esoteric experience in a correct way.[8]

The fourth function is that religions provide an extra motivation for living ethically. From his point of view, being ethical without religiosity is possible, but religions make ethical living rather more appealing by linking it to the divine.[9] The fifth function, which is intimately related to the ethical function of religions is that religions can make us free from selfishness. Religions perform this function by reminding human beings, through religions doctrines and rituals, that they are not God, but the servants of God. As selfishness is the main source of all vices, Soroush contends, by freeing us from selfishness religions play a key role in cultivating virtues.[10] The last but not the least

[5] He actually talks about seven functions of religions, but two functions in his list (the first and the fourth one) seem rather similar. Both are about religions as giving meaning to life. I, hence, treated both under the first function.
[6] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Modara and Modiriyyat [Tolerance and Management]* (Tehran: Serat, 1997), 324–25.
[7] Ibid., 238–39.
[8] Ibid., 239–44.
[9] Ibid., 245–46.
[10] Ibid., 246–50.

function of religions is that they confirm what we already (could) know independently of religions, such as the very existence of God. This is reassuring for believers to realize through divine confirmation that they are on the right path.[11] Among these functions, it seems to be the case that, only the first function is unique; the rest are useful but not *sui generis*. To sum up, since Soroush attributes good functions to religions, including Islam, this marks a significant difference between his theory of religious function, and that of al-Razi as a paradigmatic theoretician of the denial theory of revelation.

But this is not the end of story. As mentioned above, the lecture about functions of religions was delivered at a time (1995) when Soroush had not yet, at least publicly, developed his own theory of the Qur'anic revelation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Soroush starts developing his own theory of revelation from 1997 onwards. Taking this fact into account the question then is: In the light of Soroushian theory of revelation (developed from 1997 onwards), what would remain of his theory of religious functions (suggested in 1995)?

The significance of this question for our discussion is that one might pose this objection, that given the Soroushian theory of revelation nothing of these functions remain functional: let us call it 'the end of religious functions' objection. This is actually what Ganji argued, and I quoted him above. In what follows however, I shall argue that although in the light of his own theory of revelation the functions Soroush used to attribute to religions no longer work in the usual sense of the term, they could still be reconstructed to work in a rather different sense. This much then seems enough to mark a somewhat significant difference between his theory of revelation, and the typical denial theory of revelation.

'The end of religious functions' objection goes like this: if, as Soroush claims, the *content* of the Qur'anic revelation is not divine but Muhammadan and moreover Muhammad, like any other human being, was inescapably and deeply conditioned by his personality, time, place, as well as the contingent events which occurred to and around him during his life, then how could a religion constructed in this way provide the functions Soroush used to attribute to it? The answer that the objection provides to this rhetorical question is that it could not; it is because no divine content remains in the Soroushian theory of revelation to bestow upon us cosmic assurance, to facilitate our mystical and esoteric experiences, to provide right framework for interpretation of our mystical experiences, and to help us live our life morally. The end result that this objection suggests for the theory is that the Soroushian theory of revelation has left no function for religion, since no divine origin is assumed by the theory for the Qur'anic revelation, therefore it eventually turns out to be a (covert or otherwise) denial theory of revelation.

[11] Ibid., 250–52.

For Soroush, it is true that, Muhammadan forms put on the Formless (God)—when Muhammad is talking in the Qur'an about God—are not necessarily the best forms one could come up with, and therefore the gate of reformulation of religious doctrines (*ijtihad*), and implicitly even rituals, is wide open. For example, Soroush contends that historically, Muslim mystics, philosophers, and theologians (especially mystics) who came after Muhammad are not (only) commentators of Muhammadan traditions and revelatory experience that is reflected in the Qur'an, rather they have expanded, sometimes rather considerably and uniquely, Muhammadan experience:

> [O]ur mystics have enriched our religious experience and our thinkers, enhanced our religious understanding and sense of discovery. We must not imagine that these distinguished people merely explained the previous words and reproduced the earlier experiences. Al-Ghazali made new religious discoveries. So, too, did Rumi, Muhyi al-din Ibn Arabi, Shahab al-din Sohravardi, Sadr al-din Shirazi and Fakhr al-Din Razi. This is exactly how our religion has grown and become perfected.[12]

When Soroush is saying new religious insights of Muslims mystics, philosophers and theologians––and one might assume he implicitly means modern Muslim intellectuals as well—'have perfected Islam' he seriously means it.

More specifically, Soroush talks about how Rumi has significantly added to the revelatory experience of Muhammad. While for Soroush the Qur'an is the 'book of fear [of God]' (*khashyat nami*), Rumi's Masnavi is the 'book of love [of God]' (*'ishq nami*). Only after Rumi, as a 'prophet of love', could 'the celestial bird of Islam' fly with two wings—the wing of fear already prevalent in the Qur'an, and the wing of love added by Rumi in his Masnavi, which for Soroush is a divine book like the Qur'an.[13] This seems to be the logical consequence of his theory of 'the expansion of prophetic experience', which when more directly explained is actually the theory of the expansion *and contraction* of the prophetic experience. This entails that some aspects of Muhammad's religious experience and instructions, such as—but not confined to—slavery, might no longer be, over time, inspirational or even ethical to people in other areas and eras.

Having said that, the theory of expansion and contraction of prophetic experience seems not to be putting an end to the functions of religion, rather it depicts them as fluid and open-ended. For example, it is true that according to the theory of expansion and contraction the cosmic meanings that Islam provides for human life are not already fixed and finalized in the Qur'an, rather they are open to contractions and expansions brought to bear by Muslim mystics, philosophers, theologians, and maybe also intellectuals. To put it succinctly, Islam, historically speaking, is not only the revelatory experience of Muhammad, rather it is a shared experience to which at least

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[12] Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 21.
[13] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Payambar-i 'ishq [The Prophet of Love]," The Official Website of Abdolkarim Soroush, September 5, 2007, http://www.drsoroush.com/Persian/By_DrSoroush/P-NWS-Payambare%20Eshgh.html.

initially Muhammad centrally, but not exclusively, contributed. Soroush seems to be claiming that the function of religions should be interpreted in light of this shared experience.

What is divine is the whole never-ending process of contraction and expansion of esoteric experiences and intellectual intuitions directed towards the divine. The ever-evolving (rather than fixed), communal (rather than thoroughly individual), and dialogical (rather than monological) characteristic of religious experience lies at the very heart of experience. An experience being revelatory does not change the nature of experience *per se*. In this dialogical and ever-evolving sense of the revelatory experience, then, religious functions still remain functional. Hence, the Soroushian theory of revelation remains among the approval theories of revelation, and not a denial one.[14]

6.2.1.3 'Anti-orthodoxy' Objection and its Critique

So far, the argument I presented for the Soroushian theory of revelation being the approval theory was mainly historical—it was based on the historical comparison of the theory of Soroush and that of al-Razi as a paradigmatic case of the denial theoretician of revelation. My second argument, however, will be more theological. Ganji and Kadivar, as mentioned above, strive to show that the Soroushian theory of revelation is not a religious (and specifically Muslim) theory of revelation. They, however, do not take this position that Soroush is not a Muslim; as they have not taken a takfiri approach,[15] but still they believe that the Soroushian theory of revelation is far from being a '*proper Muslim'* theory of revelation.

But why is the Soroushian theory of revelation sometimes considered as a non-Muslim theory of revelation? Is it because it might make the religious functions obsolete? I already tried to show that the religious functions still appear to be working under his theory, though in a rather different sense. Or, is it because it is radically different from the 'orthodox' theory of revelation? There is no doubt that the Soroushian theory of revelation is uncompromisingly different from the 'orthodox' theory of revelation, but unless one argues that what is not 'orthodox' is not Islamic

[14] The dialogical, personalized, and evolving nature of revelatory experience has been encapsulated in this dauntless aphorism attributed to Shams of Tabriz (1185–1248), a mysterious Persian Sufi, and the spiritual mentor of Rumi: 'The treatise of Muhammad the Messenger of God would not profit me. I must have my own treatise. If I were to read a thousand treatises, I'd become darker.' Shams Tabrizi, *Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi*, trans. William Chittick (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004), 119.

[15] Kadivar emphatically denies that by critiquing Soroush he has taken a takfiri approach towards him, since Kadivar is against such an approach altogether, see Mohsen Kadivar, "Insidad-i Bab-i Naqd [The Closing of the Gate of Critique]," *Kadivar Official Website*, February 19, 2016, https://kadivar.com/?p=14998. Ganji has also never said that Soroush is not a Muslim. However, he argues that the logical outcome of the Soroushian interpretation of Islam, if taken all together, gives way to the construction of a new religion. See Akbar Ganji, "Nishanihay-i Dinsazi [The Sings of Constructing a New Religion]," *Radio Zamaneh* (blog), November 13, 2016, https://www.radiozamaneh.com/307997. Like Kadivar Ganji has also argued against takfir.

one cannot deduce from the non-orthodoxy of a theory that it is non-Islamic. Let me call this critique 'anti-orthodoxy' objection and elaborate on that.

In 1999 Bahaeddin Khorramshahi (b. 1945), an Iranian Qur'anic and literary scholar, essayist and translator, in a debate with Soroush regarding his theory of the expansion of prophetic experience raises this objection against Soroush:

> Khorramshahi: It is necessary to regard in high esteem the orthodoxy of Islam, which is the preservation of the sanctum of religion.
> Soroush: I have problem with this […][16]
> Khorramshahi: Are you suggesting that we scholars of religion should pursue our scholarly enterprise contrary to the orthodox doctrine of Islam? Is this any good?
> Soroush: What I am saying is that a scholar of religion should follow reason. Orthodoxy has become orthodoxy from a certain period onwards. In the history of Islam up until a certain period ideas were fluid. From a certain period onwards, under some political dominances ideas became rigidified. […] You should follow reason. This is a scholarly faith. If reason leads you to a position that is in line with orthodoxy then you should follow reason. But if reason leads you somewhere else again you should follow reason.[17]

Soroush's response to the 'anti-orthodoxy' objection is that Islamic 'orthodoxy' is socially constructed and politically motivated, and thus has no probative force as such to curb or curtail independent reasoning.

I think this response is persuasive. There seems to be no orthodoxy in Islam because there is no church in Islam (even in Twelver Shi'i Islam, let alon Sunni Islam) to officially distinguish orthodoxy from heterodoxy. Therefore, there seems to be no need to argue that going well beyond pseudo 'orthodox' ideas among the majority of Muslims would be—or would not be, for that matter—tantamount to bypassing Islam.[18]

6.2.1.4 Naraghi's Critique of the Soroushian theory of revelation

There is also another objection raised by Kadivar and also by Arash Naraghi. Though their objection is not explicitly an 'anti-orthodox objection', I think at the end, one can find common elements between the 'anti-orthodoxy' objection and their objections. Kadivar argues that the Soroushian theory of revelation ends up making the main source of Islam (i.e. the Qur'an) obsolete, by reducing the Qur'anic words to solely Muhammad's own speeches, and also the Qur'anic meanings to Muhammad's own dreams. He concludes that the Soroushian project therefore is not the *reformation* of Muslim thought, rather its end result would be the *invention* of new religion.[19] One reason Kadivar presents for his conclusion is that 'the consensus of all Muslims (in all ages and in

[16] Abdolkarim Soroush and Bahaeddin Khorramshahi, "Tabani-yi Soroush va Khorramshahi? [The Soroush and Khorramshahi Collusion?]," *Asr-i Andishi [The Age of Reflection]*, no. 8 (2015): 129.
[17] Ibid., 128.
[18] More on the absence of orthodoxy in Islam just below.
[19] Mohsen Kadivar, "Ma'alim-i Din, Kur-Rangi-yi Dini 2 [Millstones of Religion, Religious Blindness 2]," *Kadivar Official Website*, October 17, 2016, http://kadivar.com/?p=15619.

among all denominations) has been that the Holy Qur'an, both in its words and meanings, was brought to the heart of Muhammad b. Abdullah by Gabriel.'[20] We, however, already saw, when articulating the different Muslim theories of revelation, that there is no such historical consensus among Muslims.[21]

Somewhat related to Kadivar's objection is the argument presented in a more technical and systematic way by Naraghi. He tries to come up with a logic reasoning for the reformation of religious thought. Naraghi implicitly argues that Soroush has gone well beyond this logic, and he then concludes that Soroushian project is no longer a religious reformation project, rather it is more akin to inventing a new religion, or at least a new denomination within Islam.[22] The logic of the reformation of religious thought project, according to Naraghi, should follow 'the inner logic' of each and every religious thought framework.

The hard core of religious thought framework, according to Naraghi, is consisted of three parts:

1. 'focal sources' (*manabi'-i kanuni*),
2. 'focal teachings' (*ma'arif-i kanuni*), and
3. 'focal methods or rites' (*manahij ya adab-i kanuni*).

The focal sources, for Naraghi, are the core of the core. Focal sources play 'the rule of recognition' role, in the sense that each and every belief and method or rite nominated to be religious should pass this test to be recognized as religious. Every belief and method or rite should be entailed or at least compatible with the focal sources. Focal teachings and methods/rites are doctrines or forms of life that are directly entailed by the focal sources. Other beliefs that might not be directly entailed by focal sources, but are merely compatible with them can be taken as an 'auxiliary belt of beliefs' (*bavarha-yi kamarbandi*). Beliefs that are neither directly entailed by focal sources, nor compatible with them are simply not religious at all—even if they appear to be so.

Applying this suggested logic of religious thought framework to Islam, Naraghi considers the Qur'an and the sunna as the focal sources of Islam. He then regards these doctrines as a part of the focal teachings that are directly entailed by the Qur'an:

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[20] Ibid.

[21] For my detailed critique of Kadivar's argument, see Yaser Mirdamadi, "Rushanfikran-i Dini: Bazsazi-yi Fikr-i Dini ya Din-Sazi? [Religious Intellectuals: The Reconstruction of Religious Thought or Inventing a New Religion?]," BBC Persian Website, October 27, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-37789276.

[22] Arash Naraghi, "Nu-Andishi-yi Dini dar si Pardi [Religious Intellectualism in Three Acts]," *BBC Persian Website*, November 26, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-38025281.

1. the personal God, the God who is conscious and engages in a linguistic and inter-personal relationship with human beings,
2. that the Qur'an is the word of God,
3. life after death (*ma'ad*). He also lists prayer and fasting as the focal methods/rites directly entailed by the Qur'an.

Naraghi further argues that the logic of the reformation of religious thought framework should follow the inner logic of religious thought framework. In order to remain loyal to this logic, he suggests, Muslim reformers should take a conservative approach in their reformation. In order to reform Muslim thought framework in the face of theoretical challenges, especially brought about in the modern time, reformers should first avoid adopting beliefs that are not compatible with the focal sources. Secondly, if in the process of reform there is a need to modify religious beliefs, reformers should begin with the modification of the auxiliary belt of beliefs, not religious core beliefs. In the process of this modification, unless it is absolutely necessary, religious core beliefs should not be modified, and when it is absolutely necessary that they are to be modified, they should not be radically modified.

Naraghi then makes a crucial contrast between 'the reformation of religious thought' (*bazsazi-yi fikr-i dini*) approach, whose logic was delineated above, and another approach he calls 'the reconstruction of religion' (*bazsazi-yi din*) approach. Unlike the first approach with which he shows full sympathy, the advocates of the second approach tend to begin with radical modification of religious core beliefs, as they believe the religious core doctrines have been subjected to a number of undefeated defeaters in such a way that the modification of 'auxiliary belt of beliefs' would not be enough for making religious belief system rationally tenable. Therefore, in the second approach, in order to defend religion in the face of various defeaters, core beliefs should be radically modified. Naraghi passes this judgment that the intellectual project of Shabestari and Soroush belong to the reconstruction project, and no longer belong to the reformation project.

6.2.1.5 The Critique of Naraghi's Critique

Naraghi defends the reformation approach, and criticizes, as we saw, the reconstruction approach.[23] His main argument, as far as I can see, is that the radical modification of religious core beliefs,

[23] He also talks about the third approach which he calls 'extra-religious spirituality', and he is critical of this approach. We are not concerned with the third approach as Soroush, in Naraghi's classification, does not belong to it. It is also noteworthy that two years before the above article (for bibliography of which see footnote 728), in 2014 Naraghi published an article philosophically defending the logic of 'the reformation of religious thought' approach against the logic of 'the reconstruction of religion' approach. See Arash Naraghi, "Sunnatgirayi-yi Intiqadi dar Qalamruv-i Din, Nazariyyi-yi dar bab-i Mantiq-i Islah-i Fikr-i Dini dar Islam [Critical Rationalism in the Realm of Religion-a Theory on

when it is not necessary, leads to either the invention of a new religion (rather than the reformation of an already existing religion), or new denomination within that religion. In this section I shall argue that Naraghi's theory does not seem to me to be historically, as well as philosophically, tenable.

Is it historically defensible that going well beyond what Naraghi takes to be the religious core beliefs would end up inventing a new religion, or a new religious denomination? As far as I can see, historically it has not always been the case. As we already saw in Chapter Two, a number of Muslim theologians and philosophers developed theories of revelation denying one, or more than one of, what taken by Naraghi to be religious core beliefs (Personal God, the Qur'an as the verbatim speech of God, and the resurrection), or at least they had a radically different interpretation of these doctrines. Still, none of them are historically known to be inventing a new religion, or even a new denomination within Islam.

To illustrate, let me offer two brief examples. As we saw, Bishr al-Marisi denied the Qur'an as being literally God's speech. Though he was accused of heresy there is no record of him inventing a new religion or a new religious denomination. The same is true, *inter alia*, of Fazlur Rahman. We saw how different his theory of revelation is from the 'orthodox' theory of revelation. For Rahman revelation was already present in the mind of the prophet while it was still God's revelation. It is very different from the 'orthodox' theory of revelation, in which divine revelation is external to Muhammad's mind, and not already present in it. Despite his different theory of revelation, Rahman did not invent a new religion, nor a new religious denomination.

In order to make the theory of Naraghi immune to the counter examples that I have just presented, one might revise the theory by saying that going well beyond the religious core beliefs has a special *potential* for the invention of a new religion or religious denomination, even though historically this potential might have not be actualized in some cases, due to various political, social, local, or other factors. But it appears that this revised version of the theory comes at a high price, a price that I am not sure that Naraghi, and the advocates of his theory are willing to pay. The price is that the revised version falls short of remaining faithful to the logic of Naraghi's theory.

Naraghi's theory suggests what seems to be a *normative* model for the logic of religious reformation, by distinguishing between three kinds of beliefs and methods:

1. focal religious beliefs and methods (i.e. those that are entailed by the focal sources),
2. auxiliary belt of beliefs and methods (i.e. those that are compatible with but not entailed by the focal sources), and

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the Logic of the Reformation of Religious Though in Islam]," *The Official Website of Arash Naraghi*, January 30, 2014, http://arashnaraghi.org/wp/?p=566.

3. The beliefs and methods that seem to be religious but actually are not (i.e. those that are incompatible with the focal sources).

But the possible revised version of Naraghi's theory suggested above has gone beyond this normative logic by bringing in the potential/actual division. According to this version for example al-Marisi's or Fazlur Rahman's theory of revelation *could have led* to the invention of a new religion or at least a new religious denomination, but the fact that it did not happen, and their theories are still categorised within the range of Muslim theories of revelation is due to some non-normative factors. This implies that some non-normative factors, such as social and political factors, might be crucial in determining what is religion, and what is not. But this is exactly the point that is missing in the normative model of Naraghi's characterisation of the logic of (the reformation of) religious thought. To sum up the first critique, Naraghi's normative characterisation of the logic of religions belief and reformation of religious belief seem not to be sensitive to the historical contingencies of the dominant ('orthodox') versus marginal conceptions of religions. As we saw, the possible revised version of the theory could not remain faithful to the normative nucleus of the theory.

This brings us to my second critique of Naraghi's theory. I already claimed that there is a similarity between Naraghi's objection and 'anti-orthodoxy' objection. Naraghi comes up with an indicative list of what he takes to be Islamic core beliefs, that is to say the beliefs, such as personal God and resurrection that are allegedly entailed by the focal sources. Naraghi does not explain how these beliefs are *entailed* by the focal sources. Moreover, all focal beliefs he lists are among 'orthodox' beliefs. This strikes me as at least an unfounded, if not indefensible claim on its part. Even more than that, these focal beliefs are implicitly backed by 'orthodoxy'.

Since 'orthodoxy' is socially constructed and historically evolving, these beliefs seem not to be entailed by the focal sources, rather they are only one hermeneutical option among many other options which were not actualized, or only initially actualized but later on marginalized over the course of the history of Muslim culture. For example, the Qur'an appears to be ambiguous, if not paradoxical, as to whether, one the one hand, the words of God could be verbatim, and therefore to be heard, and sometimes altered and distorted by people, and hence by implication to be created;[24] or alternatively they are non-verbatim, infinite, and unalterable, and therefore by implication eternal,[25] or may be a mixture of both. While initially it was the Mu'tazili doctrine of the created Qur'an (one hermeneutical option among others) that was prevailing, but especially due

[24] See, e.g. Q. 2: 75, 9: 6, 48: 15.
[25] See, e.g. Q. 16: 40, 6: 115, 18: 109.

to arguably *mihna* (833-848), it was the Hanbali doctrine of the uncreated Qur'an that gained prevalence, and reached the level of 'orthodoxy'.[26]

My point is not that because the doctrine of the Qur'an being the verbatim speech of God came to be backed by 'orthodoxy', then it is *not* a theologically and philosophically defensible doctrine, it might or might not be so; the point I am making is only that to claim that this doctrine is *entailed* by the focal sources of Islam without taking into account the visible or invisible hands of 'orthodoxy' in eliminating or limiting other options—that might have otherwise been available to Muslim mentality— does not seem to be a historically sensitive way of characterising the logic of religious belief in general, and specifically the logic of the reformation of religion belief.

My last critique of Naraghi's objection is philosophical. As explained above, Naraghi depicts the logic of the reformation of Muslim thought in such a way that in the face of challenges brought about by, *inter alia*, modern scientific and philosophical theories, first the auxiliary beliefs should be revised, but core beliefs ought to be, at least initially, kept intact. Unless it is absolutely necessary, the core beliefs ought not be revised, or so goes Naraghi's theory.[27] But since 'ought implies can' (in the sense that if something is advised to be done what is advised must be, at least in principle, doable), the question then is: Is it possible for the core beliefs to remain, at least semantically, intact in the face of a challenge posed to a system of beliefs?

Based on the position implied by Naraghi's characterisation of the logic of reformation of religious thought, it seems possible for the core beliefs to remain, at least semantically, intact in the face of a challenge posed to a belief system. This possibility implies that the meanings expressed by the core beliefs in a belief system seem not to be influenced by the challenges posed to the belief system. This position seems close to what is called, specifically in the philosophy of language literature, 'semantic atomism'.

According to semantic atomism, the *role* of an expression or symbol in a language does *not* determine the meaning of an expression. Rather, it is the relation that the expression or symbol singlehandedly bears to the world (symbol-world relation) that is determinate of the meaning.[28] As we saw before, Soroush in his theory of 'the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge'

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[26] For a concise and general overview of changing 'orthodoxies' in the history of Muslim theology, see Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006). For the radical change of 'orthodoxy' in the specific case of the so called 'Satanic Verses' between the first two centuries of Islam, and the recent two centuries, see Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[27] See in this regard Arash Naraghi, "Sunnatgirayi-yi Intiqadi Dar Qalamruv-i Din, Nazariyyi-yi Dar Bab-i Mantiq-i Islah-i Fikr-i Dini dar Islam [Critical Rationalism in the Realm of Religion-a Theory on the Logic of the Reformation of Religious Though in Islam]," *The Official Website of Arash Naraghi*, January 30, 2014, http://arashnaraghi.org/wp/?p=566.

[28] Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide* (Cambridge, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 32. See also Mark Silcox, "Semantic Holism vs. Semantic Atomism," *Language & Communication* 25, no. 4 (2005): 335–49.

was against semantic atomism.[29] He takes a position in the philosophy of language which is in contrast with semantic atomism; his position is called 'semantic holism'. According to semantic holism, what determines the meaning of our expressions is the interconnected web of meanings which are connected in such a way that a change in a single expression could lead to a change in the rest of the web.[30]

Given semantic holism, then, the logic that one might suggest for the reformation of religious thought could be significantly different from the one that seems to be suggested by Naraghi. Soroush summarises his position on the logic of religious thought, and consequently the logic of religious reformation, which is clearly based on semantic holism, in this way:

> [A]s new bits of knowledge emerge, they do not leave previous bits of knowledge untouched and, if they do not dispose of them altogether, they will alter their meaning and substance, giving us a new perspective on them and lending them a new demeanour.[31]

Not only challenges, according to this alternative logic, but also even 'new bits of knowledge', presented to religious thought, do not leave, at least semantically, the core religious belief untouched and unchallenged. If this is the case, then in the light of new challenges, and new bits of knowledge presented to the religious belief system, then what Naraghi takes to be the core religious beliefs, such as the Qur'an being the verbatim speech of God, would inevitably take at least new meaning. Consequently, the whole web of religious thought needs to be, again at least semantically, reconsidered, and reshuffled, if not partially set aside.

Based on this alternative logic of the reformation of religious thought, therefore, by radically reconsidering our theories of the nature of the Qur'an, Sorsouh (or Shabestari or anyone else for that matter), has not violated the logic of the reformation of religious thought. It is seemingly the alternative logic suggested by Naraghi (and Kadivar) that seems not to be preferable to the logic suggested by Soroush. Unless Naraghi argues for his semantic atomism, and against semantic holism, or alternatively shows that his model could square with semantic holism, his suggested model for the logic of the reformation of religious thought seems to be at least unfounded if not indefensible, and therefore obviously not preferable to the alternative Soroushian logic.

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[29] See chapter 4, section 1.4.

[30] Henry Jackman, "Meaning Holism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/meaning-holism/. For a defence of taking a semantic holistic approach in the study of religion, see Mark Gardiner, "Semantic Holism and Methodological Constraints in the Study of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 79, no. 3 (2016): 281–299.

[31] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-i Ti'urik-i Shari'at, Nazariyya-Yi Takamul-i Ma'rifat-i Dini [The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowldge, a Theory of the Evolution of Religious Knowledge]* (Tehran: Sirat, 1996) 186.

So far, I have argued against categorising the Soroushian theory of Qur'anic revelation as a denial theory. I argued that this categorisation seems not to be defensible, or at least it is unfounded. My argument so far has been negative or destructive, that is I was only critiquing what I think to be the unfounded, if not indefensible categorisation of the Soroushian theory of revelation. But I have not yet argued positively and constructively for the view that the Soroushian theory of revelation could be considered as an approval theory of Muslim revelation.

The position I am willing to defend here and now is that for a theory *with regard to* Muslim revelation to be considered as an approval theory, and not the denial theory of Muslim revelation, the necessary condition is that it should simply be a *Muslim* theory. Though it might initially appear to be a truism, as it becomes clear shortly, it turns out to be a tricky position to take. Because it raises this thorny question that: Under what conditions can a theory be considered a Muslim theory? I now turn to this question.

The necessary conditions of a theory to be a Muslim theory seems only twofold:

1) it is suggested by one who considers him/herself as a Muslim,

2) it bears, in one way or another, a constructive connection to the history of Muslim thoughts and cultures.

This theory of Muslimness is a process-oriented theory, in the sense that no list of doctrines is taken as a necessary factor determining the Muslimness or otherwise of a theory or a person. According to this minimal theory of Muslimness, historically speaking those who have considered themselves as Muslim have almost all believed in at least these two articles of belief: the oneness of God, and the role of Muhammad as his messenger. Historically however, there has been a reluctance to add even belief in the Return (*ma'ad*) to this minimal list, let alone other articles of belief.[32] This is in clear contrast to the dominant theory of Muslimness according to which the Muslimness of a person or theory is necessarily dependent on its correspondence with a long, or at least not so short, list of fixed doctrines and rites.

The long list theories of Muslimness are maximalist theories of Muslimness. They are product-oriented. Though this is not the place to argue in detail for the minimalist theory of Muslimness and against the maximalist theory; suffice to say that the minimalist theory is considerably less prone to the problem of apostasy, while the maximalist theory is very much prone to it. The longer the list of essential doctrines for Muslimness, the more likely would be the possibility of apostasy and excommunication. And the problem with apostasy, briefly put, is that it

[32] Hossein Modarressi, "Essential Islam: The Minimum That a Muslim Is Required to Acknowledge," in *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: a Diachronic Perspective on Takfir*, ed. Camilla Adang et al. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), 404.

leads to unjustified violence (which in some cases has led to the execution or assassination of apostates), it would also stifle freedom of speech and rigidify religious thought.[33]

Given the minimalist theory of Muslimness, the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation could, without any difficulty, be classified as an *approval* theory of revelation, since it is a *Muslim* theory of revelation. It is a Muslim theory of revelation, because Soroush considers himself a Muslim,[34] and as we saw when articulating his theory of revelation his theory is not alien to and detached from the history of Muslim thought and culture, as there seems to be some similarity between his theory and some other Muslim theories of revelation.[35] I think these remarks are enough to make his theory a Muslim theory of the Qur'anic revelation, and therefore an approval theory.

Now, the next important question which poses itself is: Given the taxonomy suggested in Chapter Two what kind of approval theory of revelation is the Soroushian theory of revelation? In the next section I shall address this question.

6.3 The Soroushian Theory of Revelation and the Approval Theories of Revelation

In Chapter Two I divided the approval theories of revelation into internalist and externalist theories. According to the externalist theories of revelation the agency of Muhammad as the messenger of God in the process of revelation is only confined into faithfully receiving and disseminating the revelation. Muhammad by no means is engaged, according to the externalist theories, in shaping the content or even the linguistic form of the Qur'anic revelation.

The archetypal examples of externalists, reviewed in chapter two, were Ibn Hanbal and al-Ash'ari. I think it should be clear by now that the Soroushian theory of revelation is deliberately, wholeheartedly, and uncompromisingly not an externalist theory of revelation. As a matter of fact, the main deconstructive and critical emphasis of Soroushian theory of revelation is to thoroughly critique the externalist theories of revelation. By ascribing the form and even the content of the Qur'anic revelation to God, Soroush argues, *inter alia*, that the advocates of externalist theories of

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[33] For more on apostasy in Islam, see: Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Aldershot/Burlington: Routledge, 2004). For a long list (maximalist) theory of Muslimness which ends up excommunicating Shi'i Muslims, see the way Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), a Hanbali theologian, argues against different Shi'i groups, specially Nusayri and Islma'ili. See, in this regard Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayri-'Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History, and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 198–99.

[34] See, e.g. 'I have my own Islam, my own God and my own messenger. I am Muslim. But in some of my words there are things that are different from the Orthodox Shi'ism and Orthodox Islam. And I do not care'. However, in the same interview Soroush says, 'Religious intellectuals are not religious in the traditional and legalistic (*shari'ati*) sense of the term'. Abdolkarim Soroush, Bazkhani-yi mabani-yi rushanfikri-yi dini, dar guftugu ba Abdulkarim Soroush [Revisiting the Foundations of Religious Intellectualism, a Conversation with Abdulkarim Soroush], *Zeitun*, February 2, 2016, http://zeitoons.com/85.

[35] More on this below.

revelation would compromise the transcendence of God who is in His/Her/Its essence, by definition, above and beyond any forms, including linguistic form.[36] Moreover, Soroush argues that as externalists ascribe all agency involved in the Qur'anic revelation to the divine, they thereby cannot adequately explain the historicity of the Qur'an, and the peculiar features of the Qur'anic language which is, in terms of its eloquence, fluctuating and psychologically complicated.[37]

Internalist theories of revelation, as shown in Chapter Two, in one way or another, leave, in principle and to a certain degree, a possibility for significant human agency in the process of revelation. One can say, beyond reasonable doubt, that Soroushian theory of revelation belongs to this camp. Taking the anti-externalist nature of the Soroushian theory of revelation into account, the question regarding the classification of this theory, then, goes down to this: To what kind of internalist theory of revelation does it belong?

Again, it should be clear by now that the Soroushian theory of revelation belongs to the most radical spectrum of the internalist theories of revelation. It credits Muhammad with complete agency involved in the Qur'anic revelation, in terms of both form and content of the Qur'an. Construed in this way, his theory is significantly different from the moderate internalists such as Fakhr al-Razi, and generally speaking Ash'aris who make a distinction between the eternal Word of God and its expression in time. As far as the expresser could be the prophet and not spiritual beings such as angels, then this is a moderate internalist position. It is internalist because it leaves some space for the prophet to act as the expresser of the eternal Word of God. It is moderate because complete agency has not been given to the prophet.

The radical form of the internalist theory of revelation that Soroush has developed seems closer to Mu'ammar, al-Marisi, Fazlur Rahman, and Shabestari than al-Farabi, al-Sijistani or Ibn al-'Arabi. Like Mu'ammar, Soroush takes God to be beyond any attributes with probably the exception of the attribute of creator.[38] Similarly, like al-Marisi, Soroush takes a highly apophatic

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[36] For example, Soroush says addressing Sobhani: '[revelation] is not like conventional human phenomena where one person issues a command, and another implements it. What I do not understand is why, in your eyes, God's administration is like human beings' executive and managerial administrations.' *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 295.

[37] Here is an example: 'The Prophet's contemporaries used to express surprise at the fact that he ate food and walked through the streets and alleyways just like them. ("They also say, What ails this Messenger that he eats food, and goes to the market?"—25: 7) They thought that a prophet was like an angel; never eating or marrying. And today, our critics say: What sort of Prophet is it that feeds on the culture of his time and strides through the streets and alleyways of history? The logic is the same in both. Both want a Prophet that is super-human. Humanness is historical, linguistic and cultural. You would have to be angel to escape from these things.' Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 334.

[38] Soroush has frequently talked of God as creator. See, for instance Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 178, 329, 336. But as he has not discussed this attribute at length, it is not clear what he exactly means by it. Does he, for example, means creator *ex nihilo*? Or does he use it for the sake of argument, while due to his own apophatic position he himself is not willing to attribute even the attribute of creator to God? For his few remarks according to which he does not explain God's being creator in a typical terms of cause and effect, see Abdolkarim Soroush, "Surat va Bi-Surati 5 [Form and Formlessness 5]," *Aftab*, no. 10 (2001): 68.

position with regard to God's attributes, in the sense that Soroush is unwilling to attribute human attributes, such as will, consciousness, speech and so on to God.

Shabestari also gives full agency to Muhammad in shaping both the form and content of revelation. But unlike Soroush he does not try to justify his theory of revelation metaphysically. Shabestari only focuses on the nature of human language, and goes on to argue that in order to make sense of the language of the Qur'an it should be attributed both in form and content to Muhammad himself, while Soroush tries to show how our conception of the God who is formless in His/Her/Its essence, prevents us from taking the Qur'an to be the verbatim Word of God. Again, quite similar to Fazlur Rahman, Soroush believes that revelation is already present in the mind of prophet, and in this way, it is historically constructed.

As we saw, though his theory is not detached from Muslim cultures, in order to explain the phenomenon of revelation Soroush has deliberately refrained from drawing on the medieval Muslim metaphysical theories. In this regard, his theory of revelation is significantly different from al-Farabi's theory of revelation who appeals to celestial intellects, or from Ibn al-'Arabi's who appeals to five planes of divine existence, or from the new-Platonic cosmology of al-Sijistani. Though these theories of revelation could be labelled as semi-internalist theories of revelation (as they do not take the Qur'anic revelation to be the verbatim Word of God and thereby leaving the possibility for the prophet's agency in the process of revelation), due to their heavy reliance on medieval metaphysics they are significantly different from the Soroushian theory. Calling these medieval cosmologies 'heavy-duty metaphysics' (*mitafizik-i sangin*)[39] he tries to base his theory of revelation on a 'minimal metaphysics', which is a combination of the impersonal (formless) God and an apophatic theology.

So far in this section, I briefly categorised the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation within the maze of different Muslim theories of revelation. We saw that his theory of revelation belongs to the approval, rather than denial, theories of Muslim revelation, and among approval theories it belongs to the internalist rather than externalist theories of revelation. Then we saw that his theory is one of the most radical internalist theories of revelation thus far suggested.

Now, it is time to locate his theory of revelation within the realism–irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy.

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[39] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-yi Ru'yaha-yi Rasulani-6 Zihi Maratib-i Khabi Ki Bih Zi Bidiari-St [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-6 Oh Excellent! When the Stage of Sleeping Better than the (Stage of) Waking Is]," *BBC Persian* (blog), May 29, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/persian/blogs/2016/05/160525_l44_nazeran_sorush_bazargan.

6.4 Soroushian Theory of Revelation and Realism–Irrealism Debate

In this section I set out to figure out how best I can locate the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation within the realism–Irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy. Let me begin with putting aside the positions which the Soroushian theory of revelation seem not to be representing. These are ontological anti-realism on the one hand, and direct realism on the other. After briefly reminding you of what these positions are, I shall explain why the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation most probably could not be categorised under these two categories.

6.4.1 Soroushian Theory of Revelation and Direct Realism

Realism, in this research, was characteristically depicted as having three main components: ontological, semantic, and epistemological. From a realistic point of view, if God ontologically exists, God exists independently of us. Semantically, our talk of God is supposed to represent an independent reality in such a way that our language is in principle capable of being a true or false representation of that reality. And epistemologically, at least some of our significant propositions about God are known to be (at least approximately) true. Direct and indirect realism both *basically* agree on the above-mentioned three components of realism. The two versions of religious realism, however, differ on some epistemological and semantic questions. While indirect realists think our knowledge of God cannot be direct, direct realists think it can be. Moreover, direct realists think that our talk of God could be, at least to a certain extent, significantly literal while indirect realists think our talk of God is irreducibly and perhaps thoroughly figurative.

Now, the question is: Why is the Soroushian theory not a direct realistic theory of the Qur'anic revelation? The short answer, as discussed in detail before,[40] is because Soroush in his epistemological theory of religion argues against direct realism. While direct realists take knowledge to be unmediated, Soroush argues for the mediated knowledge. Knowledge, including religious knowledge, is for him a knowledge significantly influenced by the era in which the knower lives, and since God is meta-historical the historical knowledge of God is a mediated knowledge of God. As we saw, for him religious knowledge is historical and flowing, while deeply influenced by the established (scientific or otherwise) knowledge of the time.

As we saw in Chapter 3, one of the arch-defenders of religious direct realism is Alston. He argues that mental states such as belief and will can be literally and truly attributed to God without any philosophical problem.[41] Though Soroush, to the best of my knowledge, has never discussed

[40] See, Chapter 5, section 5.4.
[41] See, Chapter 3, section 3.2.3.1.

the philosophical problems of attributing mental states to God, he has discussed theological problems of this sort. Soroush takes God to be essentially formless or, put it another way, beyond any form, then for him not even forms such as mental states could be truly and literally attributed to God, though it could be done metaphorically. In a face to face discussion with John Hick, Soroush states:

> [i]n Abrahamic religions when we attribute attributions such as intention (*qasd*) and purpose (*gharaz*) to God, certainly we do not use them anthropomorphically. When attributing these attributions to God they should be either used non-literally or not used at all.[42]

A quick comparison may help us have a better grasp of the Soroush's radical position in this regard. One might accept the apophatic position developed by Soroush but still argue, as for instance Walter Stace (1886-1967) a British philosopher does, that all metaphorical (symbolic) forms put on the formless to describe God are not equal, but those 'that are taken from the highest rank of existence', such as 'mind' and 'personality' are more adequate symbols than those taken from the lower ranks of existence, such as 'physical force'.[43] Soroush, however, seems to be unwilling to pursue this path, rather he takes this radical position that since God is formless and free from any attributions, then God is equally beyond all forms and attributions.[44]

6.4.2 Soroushian Theory of Revelation and Ontological Anti-Realism

So far, I argued that the Soroushian theory of Qur'anic revelation could not be taken as a direct realist theory. Now, I shall argue that his theory is also not an ontological anti-realist theory.

Ontological anti-realists, as discussed before,[45] deny the very existence of God, in any sense of the term. We saw how Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Emil Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Richard Dawkins explained anti-realistically, i.e. without assuming the independent existence of God, the prevalence of belief in God in a psychological, sociological, biological, or neuroscientific way. I explained in Chapter Three that all ontological antirealists take a reductionist approach towards the study of religion. They argue that religion is to be explained by 'nothing but' reductionism: religion is nothing but fear, or solidarity, or meme, and so on.

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[42] Abdolkarim Soroush and John Hick, "Surat Bar Bi Surati: Guft-u-Guy-i John Hick va Abdolkarim Soroush [a Form upon Formless, a Dialogue between John Hick and Abdolkarim Soroush]," *Madrisi* 2 (2005): 53.

[43] W. T. Stace, *Time and Eternity: Essay in the Philosophy of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 98.

[44] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Surat va Bi-Surati 4 [Form and Formlessness 4]," *Aftab*, no. 9 (2001): 59. Soroush, nonetheless, talks about some religious experiences being more complete than others, but when it comes to the forms put on God as a result of these experiences he takes all forms to be equal. The difference between more complete and less complete religious experiences is that the more complete the experiences, the more the owners of experiences would be aware of the equality of all forms attributed to God (Ibid., 60). See also Soroush and Hick, "Surat Bar Bi Surati: Guft-u-Guy-i John Hick va Abdolkarim Soroush [a Form upon Formless, a Dialogue between John Hick and Abdolkarim Soroush]," 53.

[45] See chapter 3, section 3.2.2.1.

As far as talking about the very independent existence of God is concerned, ontological reductionism cannot be found in the Soroushian theory of religion, therefore his theory of the Qur'anic revelation is not ontological antirealistic theory. Soroush, however, states that 'Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Feuerbach were honourable critics of religion, and religious believers will always be indebted to their thoughtful scrutinies'.[46] Moreover, he has sometimes rather neutrally, if not sympathetically, referred to their critiques.[47]

Nevertheless, as far as I can see, to the extent that ontological antirealist critiques aim at the ways of representations and different conceptions of God, and not the very existence of God, Soroush seems to be having sympathy with these critiques, that is why he says religious believers are indebted to them. Soroush thinks humans' conceptions of God are usually anthropomorphic, and since God is beyond any form and attribute[48] then he seems to have sympathy with psychological, sociological, biological, and neuroscientific explanations of religious beliefs offered by ontological antirealists in order to criticise different representations of God. Soroush is not bothered with these critiques since he thinks God's representations in religious contexts are historical and fallible forms put upon the formless to make it comprehensible. But when it comes to antirealists' denial of the very independent existence of the divine, in any sense of the term, then Soroush's path diverges significantly from them. Soroush's approach when it comes to the very existence of God, then is not reductionist. But when it comes to God's attributes it is reductionist.

6.4.3 Soroushian Theory of Revelation and Epistemological Antirealism

I argued that the Soroushian theory is not ontological antirealistic. Since I divided antirealism into ontological and epistemological kinds, now the question is what about epistemological antirealism? Is his theory an epistemological anti-realistic? I shall argue that it is not. Epistemological antirealism holds that since we are, either in principle or at least thus far, unable to pass justified judgment as to whether or not God exists, we have to suspends any ontological judgment. Epistemological antirealists, then, are theologically agnostic.[49]

Generally speaking, though Soroush in his epistemology of religion takes the limitations of human mind rather seriously (hence his pluralization, historization, and secularization of religious knowledge), he does not go so far as to pass this judgment that ontological judgment about the

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[46] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Ki Dil bi Dast-i Kaman-Abruyi-st Kafir-Kish [In the Hand of One of Bow Eye-Brow, Kafir in Religion, Is My Heart]," *The Official Website of Abdolkarim Soroush* (blog), 2012, http://www.drsoroush.com/Persian/By_DrSoroush/P-NWS-13910316-KeDelBedasteKamanAbrooyistKaferKish.html.

[47] For one of his references to Feuerbach and Marx, see Abdolkarim Soroush, *Farbih-tar az Idi'uluzhi [Loftier than Ideology]* (Tehran: Sirat, 1994), 87–88.

[48] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Surat va bi-Surati 1 [Form and Formlessness 1]," *Aftab*, no. 6 (2001): 56–57.

[49] For more on epistemological anti-realism, see Chapter 3, section 1.2.2.1.2.

very existence of God, and the way God fundamentally is should be suspended, in principle or otherwise. Neither does his epistemology of religion imply such a suspension.

It seems true that Soroush both in his epistemology of religion and his theory of the Qur'anic revelation tries to explain religious knowledge as well as the nature of the Qur'anic revelation without appealing to the God hypothesis. His epistemology of religion does not seem to be making any significant difference between religious kind of knowledge and other kinds of knowledge, such as scientific or commonsensical knowledge. Knowledge is fallible, revisable, collective. There is never a complete and pure form of knowledge. His theory of the Qur'anic revelation also appeals to the humanity and historicity of Muhammad, to explain both the form and content of the Qur'anic revelation. But, to my mind, not appealing to the God hypothesis in his epistemology and theory of revelation does not necessarily lead, and has not led, him to theological agnosticism. He still has his own non-agnostic theology.[50] His theology, simply put, is that God formlessly exists.

However, this is not the end of story. A next question immediately poses itself: On what grounds does Soroush believe in God? More specifically, does he think that the typical arguments for the existence of God, such as ontological, teleological, and cosmological arguments, are persuasive? If not, then how does he justify his belief in God? These questions are relevant to our discussion because the answer to them show more fully the Soroushian epistemology of belief in God.

Soroush has never discussed in his published works the first question (the persuasiveness or otherwise of theistic arguments) in detail. In a response to John Hick's question, however, Soroush only alludes to his position:

> Hick: what do you think of theistic arguments? I found none of them persuasive […].
> Soroush: Yes, I have examined theistic arguments one by one and I think all they can do is to make the existence of God possible […].[51]

If, from his point of view, theistic arguments are not powerful enough to make theism preferable to atheism, but only to make it one possible option among others, then on what grounds does he prefer theism over atheism, or agnosticism? On this point, he has been rather more elaborate.

Soroush argues that belief in God is fundamentally based on faith. Moreover, faith could be reasonable, even if there were no theoretical reasons to prefer theism over other rivals (atheism or agnosticism). As a support for this claim, he argues that rationality itself is a fundamental choice

[50] Whether or not his specific theology renders his theory of religion altogether inconsistent will be discussed later in this chapter.
[51] Soroush and Hick, "Surat Bar Bi Surati: Guft-u-Guy-i John Hick va Abdolkarim Soroush [a Form upon Formless, a Dialogue between John Hick and Abdolkarim Soroush]," 54.

to make, a choice which itself is an arational—though not necessarily irrational—choice. If one appeals to reason in order to argue for opting for rationality this would end up being a circular argument. Since for the very enterprise of arguing for something to work out, one needs to take rationality for granted, and therefore one should already assume rationality in order to be able to argue in favour of rationality, hence its circularity. Soroush further argues that rationality is not the only viable fundamental choice we can make. The other choice that could be equally, if not more, reasonable is between love or faith—two concepts which he uses interchangeably.[52]

Construed in this way, Soroush does not subscribe to the persuasiveness of theistic arguments, though his position does not lead to epistemological anti-realism. According to his epistemology of religion we know that God exists though not necessarily through reason, but could through love or faith.

6.4.4 Soroushian Theory of Revelation and Nonrealism

In this section I argue that although the Soroushian theory of revelation initially seems to be a full-fledged non-realistic theory, in the last analysis it seems not to be so.

In Chapter Three I divided irrealism into antirealist irrealism, and non-realist irrealism. Antirealists are cognitivist about religious language, in the sense that they think that religious utterances are supposed to express doxastic (belief-related) mental states, and therefore religious utterances are capable of being true or false, and they do have a descriptive function, and therefore they are truth-apt. But antirealists then add that religious utterances are either false, or their truth or falsity is not discernible. For them religious utterances, in one way or another, fail to satisfy their descriptive function.

Religious non-realists, on the other hand, are non-cognitivist, since they think, in one way or another, that religious language does not contain beliefs and doctrines, and is not, in principle, in the business of fact-stating claims, therefore it has no descriptive function, rather it expresses only non-cognitive states such as passion and fear. In the previous section I discussed whether the Soroushian theory of revelation is antirealistic. I argued that it seems not to be so. If not anti-realistic, does nonrealism capture the best category under which this theory can be categorised? I turn to this question now in this next section.

Initially it might seem the case that the Soroushian theory of religion in general has gradually reached a point where it appears not so far from non-cognitivism. And if turns out to be non-cognitivistic then it is non-realistic, since the minimum requirement of realism or antirealism is

[52] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Hikmat-i Yunaniyan Hikmat-i Imaniyan [The Wisdom of the People of Greece, The Wisdom of the People of Faith]," *Naqed*, no. 1 (2004): 137–58.

cognitivism. For example, Soroush in his Persian lectures delivered in Harvard and MIT in 2001 discusses religion in the modern world, and specifically the relationship between religion and secularism.

Soroush argues that one of the significant outcomes of the process of secularisation in the modern world is the secularization of 'religious thought' (*andishi-yi dini*), as well as the secularization of 'religious motivation' (*angizi-yi dini*). In the light of the new secular worldview brought about by the advancement of modern science, technology, and philosophy we as modern people, do not usually appeal to the God hypothesis to explain the natural world, or social and historical events. This is the secularization of thought. The political consequence of the secularization of thought is the separation of church and state. As far as the secularization of *thought* is concerned, Soroush has no problem with it, and even wholeheartedly embraces it. Moreover, his own epistemology of religion, and his naturalistic theory of the Qur'anic revelation is an instance of the secularization of thought.

Soroush argues that the secularization of thought is not at odds with what he calls 'the mission of prophets', since their mission was not to teach people how to think but to free people's thought from hatred, selfishness, and bigotry. Since the way people think is not crucially relevant to the mission of prophets the secularization of thought does not, at least directly, undermine the mission of prophets.[53] But when it comes to the secularisation of motivation, Soroush has his own reservations.

The secularization of thought, he argues, has brought about the secularisation of motivation. If everything can be explained or discerned to be right or wrong without appealing to the God hypothesis, then why do we need to have divine motivation in what we are doing? For example, we know that remaining healthy, and treating others in a moral way is what God wants us to do. But since we know how to remain healthy, and how to treat others morally without appealing to God's teachings, or even the God hypothesis, then why do we need to remain healthy and treat others morally for the sake of God? Soroush's point is that the secularization of thought has led to the secularization of motivation, and while the former is not at odds with the mission of prophets, the latter is.

What is wrong with the secularization of motivation from his perspective? Soroush argues that the secularization of motivation reduces rationality to 'instrumental reason'.[54] For instrumental

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[53] Abdolkarim Soroush et al., *Sunnat va Secularism [Tradition and Secularism]* (Tehran: Serat, 2002), 83.

[54] This is a term Soroush borrows explicitly from Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) a German sociologist and philosopher. For a concise account of 'instrumental reason' from the perspective of Habermas, see Karl Spracklen, *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure, Habermas and Leisure at the End of Modernity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Ch. 2, Darrow Schecter, *The Critique of Instrumental Reason from Weber to Habermas* (London/New York: Continuum, 2010), Ch. 6.

reason nothing is inherently valuable or invaluable, rather things become valuable as far as they could be used for our purposes, and invaluable if they are not profitable. What is missing in the instrumental approach to reason is contentment and altruism. Only love or divine motivation (faith) can bring contentment and altruism back to our one-sided utilitarian rationality:

> As far as rationality is concerned, you will not find in it the element of altruism (*guzasht*). This is what humanity in the modern time completely lacks. If there is a motivation for altruism, it would surely be a religious or quasi-religious motivation.[55]

What is the relevance of this discussion to the possible non-realistic interpretation of the Soroushian theory of Qur'anic revelation? We already saw that among non-realist philosophers, more explicitly than others, Cupitt takes religion to be 'beliefless' and therefore non-cognitive. Since, according to Soroush, thought is not central in the mission of prophets (hence his assertion that the secularization of thought is not detrimental to religion) but motivation is, then if we accept, firstly, this psychological position that desire and belief must join each other to motivate an action, and, secondly, if we accept that desire is a non-doxastic mental state, then the Soroushian theory of religion due to its 'belieflessness' character turns out to be non-cognitive. And if it is non-cognitive then it is non-realistic.[56]

Though, as we saw above, in some parts of his discussion Soroush appears to be making a sharp contrast between thought and motivation, as if motivation can be independent of thought, yet in some other parts of the same discussion he explains the inseparable relation of at least motivation to thought. For example, he makes this general observation that 'our motives follow our thoughts'.[57] If this is the case, then it would be paradoxical to say that the secularization of thought is acceptable, while the secularization of motivation is not. If Soroush thinks motivation follows thought, then the secularization of motivation is an inevitable consequence of the secularization of thought and he cannot, without talking paradoxically, embrace the secularizing of thought, and at the same time do away with the secularization of motivation. Let us call this 'the paradox of the secularization of thought and motivation.'

I think one solution to this paradox is to charitably interpret Soroush as saying a totally Godless thought leaves no room for people to retain divine motivation in what they do. The secularization of thought seems acceptable for him only to a certain extent but not completely; in the sense that in the realms of empirical and social sciences (including religious studies) there is no

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[55] Abdolkarim Soroush et al., *Sunnat va Secularism [Tradition and Secularism],* p. 95.

[56] That the Soroushian theory of religion (specially the relation he suggests between faith and reason) could be interpreted, at least sometimes, as getting close to non-cognitivism is also alluded to without detailed discussion by Ali Paya (1953-) an Iranian public intellectual and philosopher. See Ali Paya, "Abdolkarim Soroush: The Hesitant Rationalist," in *Ishraq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook*, ed. Yanis Eshots, no. 6 (2015): 269.

[57] Abdolkarim Soroush et al., *Sunnat va Secularism [Tradition and Secularism]*, p. 70.

need to appeal to the God hypothesis in order to explain the natural world or social, political, and religious events. But when it comes to the philosophical secularization of religious worldviews—a process which ends up denying the very independent existence of the divine—then Soroush does not endorse secularization. This charitable interpretation is, I think, in line with the distinction Soroush constantly makes between 'political secularism', i.e. the separation of church and state, which he embraces, and 'philosophical secularism' which he does not embrace:

> philosophical secularism is synonymous with atheism and with lack of belief in religion. It is a kind of materialism. This type of secularism can't be combined with religious thinking.[58]

Interpreted in this way, then, Soroush does not take religion to be beliefless. He takes religious utterances to express beliefs, but at the same time he takes some (actually most) parts of religious beliefs to be accidental rather than essential, to the extent that secularizing them is not detrimental to the core religious belief. More directly related to our discussion, Soroush depicts the world's relationship to God as the relationship between a tree and its shadow. Whatever the shadow thinks of the tree does not affect the dependency of the shadow on the tree,[59] while in the non-realistic conception of God, God is depicted as being dependent on the subject and not vice versa. The conclusion is that since his theory of religion is still doxastic and truth apt then it is a cognitivist theory of religion, and hence not a non-realistic theory of religion.

6.4.5 Soroushian Theory of Revelation: indirect Realistic or a hybrid position?

Based on my suggested taxonomy of realism–irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy, there remain only two categories for us to consider in order to determine which one of them philosophically better explains the Soroushian theory of Qur'anic revelation: indirect realism, or a hybrid position. In this section I shall argue that the Soroushian theory does not seem to be even indirectly realistic, therefore a hybrid position seems to be the best category to philosophically categorise his theory of the Qur'anic revelation.

We already saw that direct and indirect realism both agree on the three components of realism: 1. ontological (the independent existence of God), 2. semantic (truth-aptness of religious utterances), and 3. epistemological (at least some of the significant theological propositions are—at least approximately—true). As I explained above, Soroush in his general theory of religion does affirm the ontological component of realism. I also explained above that he does not think that

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[58] Abdolkarim Soroush, "We Must have a Referendum in Iran", interview by Farzaneh Bazrpour, The Official Website of Abdolkarim Soroush, trans. Nilou Mobasser, 2010, http://www.drsoroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-20100200-WeMustHaveAReferendumInIran.html.

[59] Abdolkarim Soroush et al., *Sunnat va Secularism [Tradition and Secularism]*, 100–102.

theistic arguments are persuasive, rather he thinks we might be justified in taking the existence of God as basic. Moreover, the very existence of the Formless God, for him, is not the projection of our aspirations. In this sense, his position is different from that of Feuerbach and Cupitt, and other antirealists or non-realists like them.

I also discussed the semantic component of the Soroushian theory of religion, and I concluded that for Soroush religious utterances expresses belief, and therefore they are capable of being true or false (they are truth apt). So, as far as I can see, out of three components of realism, the Soroushian theory of religion in general has already satisfied its two components. The question, then, boils down to see whether the Soroushian theory of revelation satisfies the third (epistemological) component. In what follows, I shall argue that it seems not to be doing so. Hence, it is not a critical realist theory, rather it is a hybrid position.

But why am I making this claim that the Soroushian theory of revelation does not seem to be satisfying the epistemological component of our characterisation of realism? The short answer is that because Soroush regards what he takes to be the central Qur'anic picture of God, prophecy, God-human relationship, and afterlife to be false or at least no longer defensible. Akbar Ganji has written extensively about this point. The main conclusion, Ganji draws out of his discussion however, that Soroush deliberately, gradually, and covertly, is building up his own religion seems to me unfounded.[60] Not only because in a reaction to Ganji's writings Soroush has blatantly denied any claim to prophecy,[61] but also because Ganji's arguments are highly speculative,[62] and committing the fallacy of appealing to faulty motives.[63] Though Ganji's main conclusion seems to me not to be defensible, his discussion of how the Soroushian theory of religion lacks—in our terminology and not Ganji's—the epistemological component of realism is rather worthy of mentioning in detail.

We already discussed in this chapter how Soroush argues that mystical insights have considerably enriched Islam, and specifically how he thinks by Rumi's *Masnavi* Islam found his second wing, that was added to the already existent wing of the Qur'an as the book of fear. Ganji in at least one of his polemical articles against Soroush dwells on this point. Ganji bases his article

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[60] See, for instance Akbar Ganji, "Iddi'ay-i Payambari-yi Soroush va va'di-yi Faragiri-yi Firqi-yi Soroushiyyi [Soroush's Claim to Prophecy and the Promise of the Ubiquity of Soroushianism]," *Radio Zamaneh*, August 14, 2016, https://www.radiozamaneh.com/293903.

[61] See the transcription of Soroush's denial in Akbar Ganji, "Nazariyyi-yi Payambari-yi Soroush [The Theory of Soroush's Prophecy]," *Radio Zamaneh*, November 9, 2016, https://www.radiozamaneh.com/307422, footnote 1.

[62] For a concise as well as illuminating critique of Ganji's position, see Mohammad-Mahdi Mojahedi, "Az Niyyat-Khani ta Tujih-Garayi: dar bab Imkan-i Firqi-yi Soroushiyyi [From Appealing to Motive to Justificationism: On the Possibility of Establishing 'the Soroushainism Sect']," *Din online*, August 15, 2016, http://dinonline.com/doc/note/fa/6597/.

[63] 'The fallacy of appealing to faulty motives is committed when it is argued that, because someone's *motives* for defending an issue are not proper, the issue itself is unacceptable', Alex C. Michalos, *Improving Your Reasoning* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1986), 56. Likewise, Ganji commits this fallacy by arguing that since the alleged motive of Soroush is to build up a new religion therefore the Soroushian position is not defensible.

on the meticulous study of recent oral lectures delivered by Soroush on the commentary of Masnavi—oral lectures that have not yet been edited and published.[64]

Ganji lists seven substantial differences that Soroush makes between what Ganji calls 'the religion of Muhammad', versus 'the religion of Rumi'.[65] The first difference is that in the Qur'an, which is the manifesto of the religion of Muhammad as the religion of fear, love of God is marginal—though not totally absent,[66] while in *Masnavi*, as the manifesto of the religion of Rumi as the religion of love, love is central.

The second difference is that the Qur'an is the book of jihad (war against unbelievers), in such a way that even among believers, the jihadi believer is elevated over the non-jihadi believer: 'Those believers who stay at home, apart from those with an incapacity, are not equal to those who commit themselves and their possessions to striving in God's way.'[67] But according to Soroush, in Rumi's *Masnavi* jihad is turned inside out in the sense that central weight is given to the purification of the soul (inner jihad), and fight against unbelievers (outer jihad) is even implicitly de-emphasized: 'Kill your fleshly soul and make the world (spiritually) alive / it (your fleshly soul) has killed its master: make it (your) slave.'[68]

The third difference is that, according to Soroush, the Qur'an makes a sharp contrast between believers and unbelievers, while in *Masnavi* this sharp contrast is lacking. The fourth difference is that in the Qur'an, specially due to the centrality of the fear relationship with God and the marginality of love relationship with God, the human-God relation is modelled on slave-master relationship; while in *Masnavi* it is modelled on lover-beloved relationship.

The fifth difference is that prayer rituals of Islam, such as bowing down (*ruku'*) and prostration (*sujud*) are taken from the master-slave behavioural scheme; while Rumi endorsed yet another prayer rituals such as 'Sufi dance' (*sama'*) and music which are the prayers of lovers. The sixth difference is that while according to Soroush the Qur'an is the book of 'sorrow' (*huzn nami*) Masnavi is the book of 'delight' (*tarab*). The last but theologically the most important difference

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[64] To base an article or book mainly on the study of *oral* lectures of a living thinker is methodologically problematic. It is because, usually like many other scholars, Soroush tends to revise, sometimes rather considerably, his oral lectures when preparing them for publication. That is why in my study I deliberately confined myself only to the (offline or online) publications of Soroush, doing away with referring to his oral lectures. However, in this specific case Ganji (and, by referring to Ganji, indirectly I) might be justified in referring to not yet edited and published oral lectures of Soroush, because Soroush has already published some stuff regarding the religion of Muhammad (and his book of fear) versus the religion of Rumi (and his book of love).

[65] Akbar Ganji, "Soroush: 'khauf-nami-yi Jahadi-Bardigi-yi Qur'an' va 'Ishq-Nami-yi Qiyr-i Bardigi-yi Masnavi' [Soroush: 'The Qur'an as the Slavish-Jihadist Book of Fear' and 'Masnavi as the Non-Jihadist Book of Love']," *Radio Zamaneh*, August 1, 2016, https://www.radiozamaneh.com/291992. All further references to be made are to this source.

[66] One rare example would be: 'God will soon replace you with people He loves and who love Him', Q. 5: 54. All other explicitly love examples in the Qur'an are: 2: 165 & 3: 31.

[67] Q. 4: 95.

[68] Masnavi, III: 2504.

between 'the religion of Muhammad' and 'the religion of Rumi' is that the former is based upon the personal God, while the latter is based on the formless God.

The conclusion one might draw from this discussion is that as the Soroushian theory of revelation does not satisfy the third (epistemological) component of realism, (because he takes the main body of the way God is described in the religious literature, including revelatory literature of Islam, i.e. the Qur'an as being false, it is not even indirect realistic theory of revelation. There remains, according to our classification, therefore, only one position to classify his theory of religion in general, and his theory of revelation specifically: the hybrid position.

We already saw in Chapter 3 how John Hick's theory of religion can be interpreted as representing the hybrid position. I explained how for John Hick 'the *core* of religious language is factual in character, so that it professes to indicate something of the actual structure of reality' (emphasis added).[69] But putting aside the very existence of divine reality which is interpreted by him realistically, when it comes to the ways in which divine reality are variously, and even paradoxically represented in different religious traditions and cultures, Hick is of the opinion that they are 'mythic expressions'. Since mythic expressions are not 'literally true-or-false assertions' the myths of religions are not to be set in opposition to each other. As far as these mythic expressions help believers to gain salvation—which is for Hick the transformation of human life from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness—they are true, but not true in the realistic sense, rather true in the pragmatic sense.

The conclusion is that the Soroushian theory of religion, and specifically his theory of revelation can be interpreted as being very close to this Hickian model. Therefore, the Soroushian theory of religion and revelation is a hybrid position. Like Hick, Soroush thinks that God exists independently but the way God is depicted in different religious cultures is the outcome of cultural differences, and not the outcome of different manifestations of God. This is the combination of minimal realism (as far as the very existence of God is concerned), and non-realism (as far as God's attributes are concerned), and hence its hybrid position.

6.5 The Critique of the Soroushian Theory of the Qur'anic Revelation

After categorising the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation within different Muslim theories of revelation, and also within the realism-irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy, now it is time to raise some critiques against it. In this section I shall provide what I think to be the key critique one can raise against the Soroushian theory of religion in general, and against his theory of revelation specifically. I shall argue that though Soroush tries to take a realist position (or in our

[69] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1990), IX.

categorization a hybrid position), his theology, and in particular his theory of revelation is susceptible to lapse into non-realism, or at least getting very close to it, and hence it seems ultimately hardly consistent. Let us call this objection the 'Inconsistency Objection'.

6.5.1 The Inconsistency Objection

In the version of inconsistency objection, I am going to present and defend here,[70] I shall argue that the Soroushian theory of revelation, when taken to its logical extremes, to a significant extent looks like a well-known metaethical[71] position called 'error theory'. I call it 'the quasi theological error theory'. This comparison sheds light on how to make sense of the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation, in terms of its complex relation to the realism-irrealism debate.

Since moral error theory is widely, and as I shall argue justifiably, taken to be a non-realist metaethical theory, then its Soroushian theological counterpart, i.e. the quasi theological error theory, turns out to be non-realistic too, or at least very close to it. Since the Soroushian theory of religion claims to be realistic, now it seemingly turns out to be non-realistic or at least very close to it. Consequently, at the end it apparently ceases to be consistent.

Generally speaking, moral error theory, while being a version of moral scepticism, has one thing in common with moral realism: cognitivism. Both error theory and realism typically agree that moral judgments express beliefs and are truth-apt. Both further agree that moral judgments are supposed to reflect objective moral values. But they differ on whether there are moral objective values. While moral realists defend, in one way or another, the existence of objective moral values, error theorists, in one way or another, deny it. For error theorists religious judgments are

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[70] For a rather different version of inconsistency objection that I used to present, see my forthcoming article: Yaser Mirdamadi, "Soroush's Theory of Qur'anic Revelation: A Historical–Philosophical Appraisal," in *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Iran*, ed. Allesandro Cancian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Forthcoming). There I argue that the Soroushian theology and specifically his theory of revelation end up being relativistic. Since, so the objection goes, the Soroushian epistemology—upon which, as he claims, his theory of revelation is based—claims to be non-relativistic, his theology and specifically his theory of revelation then seems not to be consistent with his epistemology. I still think the relativism version of inconsistency objection needs to be responded to by Soroush and/or advocates of his theology, and specifically his theory of revelation. Now, however, I think the stronger versions of inconsistency objection can be made which appears to me to be the versions to be explained and defended above in this chapter. The relativism version of inconsistency objection, even if defensible, now seems to me not to be the strongest version of inconsistency objection. It is because a rejoinder might be made in defence of Soroush that Soroushian theology and specifically his theory of revelation do not lead to theological relativism; for, if not anything else, the ethical criterion to adjudicate between acceptable and unacceptable (forms of) religions is still in place in the Soroushian theory of religion. Due to the high emphasis of Soroush on the independence of ethics from religion, and the dependence of religion upon ethics, this rejoinder is not unlikely. To what extent this rejoinder is defensible, however, is a discussion for yet another place.

[71] Metaethics is the philosophical exploration on the nature and status of morality. It is the most fundamental branch of ethics or moral philosophy which addresses the metaphysical (such as: are there moral facts?), epistemological (such as: how do we know what is good or bad?), semantic (such as: do moral judgments express beliefs?), and psychological (such as: do moral reasons motivate one to act morally?) presuppositions of moral thought and judgment. For a neat, lucid, precise and concise overview of metaethical discussions, see Fisher, *Metaethics*. See, also Simon Kirchin, *Metaethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

systematically false. Despite systematic falsity of moral judgments, error theorists claim, we should not give up on moral language since it serves the positive psychological, and sociological purpose. Error theory, then 'holds that moral practice is justified through its usefulness, not through its truthfulness.'[72]

6.5.1.1 Mackie's Moral Error Theory

Here I only focus on the most famous and now classical version of error theory suggested by J. L. Mackie (1917-1981) an Australian philosopher, and the pioneer of error theory who also coined the term 'error theory'. The essence of my argument, to be fleshed out below, is that not only the *outcome* of Mackie's argument for error theory bears insightful resemblance to the Soroushian theory of religion, and specifically his theory of the Qur'anic revelation, but also Mackie's *arguments* seem similar to the Soroush's arguments—hence the suggested title 'theological error theory'.

Initially in an article published in 1946,[73] and in an expanded form later in his famous and influential book entitled 'Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong' (1977) Mackie presents two arguments for his moral error theory. His first argument is called, by Mackie himself, the 'relativity argument'. It begins with the simple and uncontroversial anthropological fact that different societies have different moral codes and beliefs, and even a single society has typically different moral codes and beliefs over time. These disagreements are different from disagreement amongst the scientific community as the scientific disagreement stems from theoretical disagreements, while moral disagreement is well rooted in different life styles. Scientific disagreement is such that the more evidence scientists have, and more correctly they argue the narrower, in principle, the domain of disagreements between them would be.

But in moral disagreements, even if different communities agree on all facts and argue correctly, the disagreement might still remain, since it is rooted in different lifestyles, rather than being a mainly theoretical disagreement. Moreover, the best explanation of moral disagreements, so goes Mackie's argument from relativity, is not, as realists claim, that there are objective moral values that some societies are better equipped than others at capturing; rather, the best explanation is, that there are only subjective moral attitudes that are objectified into moral values by different communities. The projected moral attitudes are mainly based on people's wants and needs.[74]

The second argument Mackie gives for moral error theory is called, by himself and widely known as, 'the argument from queerness'. Mackie argues that if there were objective values they

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[72] Andrew Fisher, *Metaethics*, 46.
[73] J. L. Mackie, "A Refutation of Morals," *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 24, no. 1–2 (1946): 77–90.
[74] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1977), 36–8 & 42-3.

should be 'totally different' from other things, and hence they would be very strange and queer kinds of things. It is because if there were objective values, they should be independent of us, accessible, and give us desire-independent reasons for action. Moreover, to know these totally different entities or qualities or relations (i.e. objective moral values) we need a totally different cognitive faculty (moral intuition). But it is empirically shown that there is no such faculty, and it is no good to postulate alternatively that these objective moral values exist, but they are totally inaccessible. Therefore, the best explanation of non-existence of moral intuition is that there are no moral values.[75] Despite the systematic falsity of moral judgments, Mackie argues that morality is inevitable, and therefore we should not give up on that: '[w]e need morality to regulate interpersonal relations, to control some of the ways in which people behave towards one another, often in opposition to contrary inclinations.'[76]

Before turning to the Soroushian theological error theory let us be clear about why Mackie's moral error theory is not realistic, and it is aptly taken to be so.[77] Though Mackie endorses cognitivism, and therefore meets the semantic component of realism, he denies the ontological component of realism by his denial of the existence of objective moral values, and consequently he denies the epistemological component of realism, since if there are no objective moral values then they are not there to be known. Now let us see how Soroush presents arguments similar to both Mackie's relativity argument, and argument from queerness in his theory of religion, and specifically in his theory of revelation.

6.5.1.2 The Soroushian Quasi Theological Error Theory

Arguments similar to Mackie's relativity argument, and argument from queerness mentioned above can be found in the Soroushian theory of religion. Let us begin with the religious relativity argument, and then turn to religious argument from queerness. Soroush argues that since truth, including religious truth, is irreducibly multi-layered then religious truth cannot be confined to only one religion, but rather all world religions, in one way or another and more or less, are true or have a portion of the truth. This pluralism is contrasted with 'religious exclusivism' according to which

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[75] Ibid., 38-42. For a concise and accessible formulation of Mackie's error theory, see Robert L. Muhlnickel, "The Error Theory Argument," in *Just the Arguments: 100 of the Most Important Arguments in Western Philosophy*, ed. Michael Bruce and Steven Barbone (Malden/Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 232–6. See also Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin, "Introduction," in *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*, ed. Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (New York: Springer, 2010), xi–xv.

[76] Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 43.

[77] While Mackie's error theory is widely taken to be a theory which is not realistic, for an exceptionally realist interpretation of Mackie's error theory, see Jamie Dreier, "Mackie's Realism: Queer Pigs and the Web of Belief," in *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*, ed. Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (New York: Springer, 2010), 71–86. It is notable that the author uses realism in a different meaning from the one we delineated in this research.

truth is reserved for only one religion—though it remains a matter of heated disagreement, if not conflict, among religious exclusivists of different religions which religion is true. This is also contrasted with the less exclusive but not pluralistic enough stance usually called 'religious inclusivism', according to which one religion possesses the absolute truth, and other religions as far as they are similar to the truth of that absolutely true religion are true, otherwise they are false.[78]

In Soroushian religious pluralism, however, all world religions, as far as their theological contents are concerned are *equally* true. Soroush, by and large, presents three arguments for his religious pluralism: one is his truth-related argument mentioned above to the effect that religious truth is irreducibly multi-layered. His second argument is epistemological; he argues that when it comes to religious truth, historically human reason reaches an antinomic conclusion, in the sense that 'in some instances reason really comes up against a wall and has to content with two totally contradictory positions, such that it is impossible to come down decisively in favour of one or the other.'[79]

And the third argument is theological. In order to explain God's 'guidance' (*hidaya*) and God's name 'the Guide' (*hadi*), Soroush argues that, one should first look at the phenomenon of the diversity of religions and denomination across the world, and in all history, and only *then* should one explain God's guidance in terms of this inevitable diversity, rather than the other way round. Namely, rather than first defining God's guidance in an exclusivist way, and then when faced with the diversity of religions and denominations consider them all but one to be the true religion, and others as deviant and devoid of divine guidance. The first approach which he defends is *a posteriori* (in this context means *after* taking into account the phenomenon of religious diversity) while the second approach which he criticizes is *a priori* (in this context means *before* taking into account the phenomenon of diversity). Following a priori logic, Soroush contends, makes God's guidance futile, since 'it would mean that large parts of the world are always under the sway and reign of the devil, and only a tiny, tremulous part under the protection of God.'[80]

Further details of the Soroushian religious pluralism need not concern us here.[81] What is centrally relevant to our current discussion is that for Soroush different conceptions of God or ultimate reality among different religions and religious denominations could be adequately explained by referring to social, historical, anthropological, sociological, regional, and other natural

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[78] For more on this tripartite distinction in philosophical discussion of religious diversity, see David Basinger, "Religious Diversity (Pluralism)," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2015, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/religious-pluralism/. See also this book of David Basinger: *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

[79] See, for example, Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 176.

[80] Ibid., 141.

[81] For more on the Soroushian religious pluralism, see Abdolkarim Soroush, *Sirathay-i Mustaqim [Straight Paths]* (Tehran: Sirat, 1999).

factors like these. This implies that in order to explain religious diversity there is no need to appeal to the God hypothesis. Put simply, the implication is that God plays no role in the way God is understood and depicted variously in different cultures and eras. For just one example, quoting John Hick, Soroush argues that God's masculinity in monotheistic religions is related to the patriarchal characters in ancient tribes, and this is contrasted with the femininity of the pre-Aryan gods in India which were influenced by the specific cultural and socio-economic setting of that region.[82]

Given the specific theology of Soroush, as we discussed before, this way of explaining the phenomenon of religious diversity is not surprising. As for Soroush God is formless then the forms put on God cannot be explained theologically, rather they should be explained non-theologically. This is for example different from Ibn 'Arabi's explanation of religious diversity in which God manifests Him/Her/Itself differently to different religions, as we explained before.[83] Ibn 'Arabi's version of religious pluralism is a version which can be called 'manifestational religious pluralism'. In this version, the God hypothesis is uesd in order to explain religious diversity, while in the Soroushian version of religious pluralism, which can be called 'formless religious pluralism' God plays no role in shaping the different forms that different religions and denominations have taken over the course of history. Therefore, the God hypothesis cannot be appealed to for the explanation of religious diversity. Ibn 'Arabi makes a distinction between God's essence and God's manifestations. God's essence for him is beyond comprehension and looks like the formless God of Soroush. But Ibn 'Arabi does not stop there. For him God has infinitely different manifestations and God manifests Him/Her/Itself through imaginal embodiment, for example as in the case of Moses through his needs. But in the formless religious pluralism of Soroush, God is so formless that God has no manifestation whatsoever.

Soroushian religious pluralism, then, turns out to be functionally the same as Mackie's relativity argument for moral error theory. While Soroush and Mackie try to explain rather different kinds of diversity (the former religious diversity, the latter moral diversity), their explanation does not appeal to anything but social constructions (of morality and religion respectively) to come up with an explanation of ethics and religion. Their explanation, therefore, is functionally similar.

One, however, might object to this comparison by saying that while Mackie denies objective moral values, and therefore does not appeal to them to explain moral diversity, Soroush does not deny God, even though he does not appeal to the God hypothesis to explain religious diversity. What I can say in response is that although it is true that Soroush does not deny God of

[82] Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 131.
[83] See Chapter Two, the section on Ibn 'Arabi.

any kind. But, any specific kind of God which he defends (the formless God) is such that the God hypothesis cannot be appealed to in order to explain the phenomenon of religious diversity, because on the one hand the phenomenon of religious diversity is the outcome of different *forms* of depicting God, and on the other hand God is nothing but *form*less. However, the very fact that the Soroushian position is not ontological anti-realistic, rather it is ontological realistic leads me to call his position a *quasi*-theological error theory, rather than a theological error theory without any qualification. But as we shall see this does not seem to be freeing his theory from the inconsistency objection, since Mackie's error theory, and its religious counterpart, namely the Soroushian quasi theological error theory, seem to be functionally the same.

I already said that both Mackie's arguments for his moral error theory can be compared to some arguments Soroush suggests for his theory of religion. The first of Mackie's argument was the 'relativity argument' which I have argued seems functionally much the same as the formless religious pluralism of Soroush. The second of Mackie's argument is 'the argument from queerness'. Now, I shall argue that the argument similar to Mackie's argument from queerness can be found in the Soroushian theory of religion. More specifically, in the light of Mackie's specific kind of argument from queerness that we are concerned with here,[84] and drawing on the Soroushian theology and specifically his theory of revelation, one can reconstruct a Soroushian religious queerness argument.

The Soroushian religious argument from queerness can be formulated as follows:

(p1) Queer things are mentioned in the Qur'an.

(p2) They are so queer that they can only be explained by taking them to happen merely in dreams.

(c1) The queer things mentioned in the Qur'an happen merely in dreams (from 1 & 2).

(p3) If the queer things mentioned in the Qur'an happen merely in dreams then the Qur'anic revelation as a whole is of a dream nature.

(c2) The Qur'anic revelation as a whole is of the dream nature (from c1 & 3).

Though this formulation and the term 'queerness' used here are not found in the words of Soroush, all premises of the above formulation by different wording can be found in his writings.

[84] It is to be mentioned that according to some commentators, Mackie actually makes four kinds of queerness arguments: supervenience, knowledge, motivation, and irreducible normativity. The kind of queerness argument with which we are dealing here is the knowledge argument and not the other three arguments. As explained above, the knowledge argument from queerness says if there were objective values to read, they would be so queer that it would take a special moral faculty to know them, and as there is no such separate faculty, then there are no moral objective values. For dividing queerness argument into four kinds, see Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Chs. 5 & 6.

Regarding premise one, I already explained in Chapter 5 how Soroush tries to internalise all seemingly external explanations of the Qur'an, in the sense that he takes the Qur'anic descriptions of, *inter alia*, God's actions in the world (like punishing people for their sins), events in afterlife, Muhammad's night journey and ascension, and so on as being nothing but the dreams of Muhammad. These descriptions, if taken externally, are enormously queer for him, that is why he concludes that they can only be explained as dreams rather than reflecting external metaphysical realities:

> In the Qur'an, God so vividly shines through trials and events, leaving little room for natural causes. He makes such unfamiliar and unintuitive connections between different events and orchestrates such unexpected and counter-habitual scenes that one can hardly make sense of them other than in dreams.[85]

What about premise three that the Qur'an *as a whole* is of a dream nature? This premise is very crucial in the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation, especially because at least some critics of Soroush accept that prophetic dreams could be divine revelation. For example, Mohammad Ali Ayazi (b. 1954), a Qur'anic scholar and high-ranking cleric based in Qum, refers to some Qur'anic verses[86] in which revelation comes in the form of dreams. But Ayazi further argues that dream is only one kind of revelation, and the whole Qur'anic revelation cannot be explained in this way.[87] But Soroush emphatically thinks it can:

> There is no doubt that the Qur'an has an entirely unified language: it is either a waking language or a dream language; it is either one or the other, it cannot be both. Due to the dream-like aura of the Qur'an, undoubtedly, the language of the Qur'an is thoroughly a dream language.[88]

Taken all together these premises work like a religious version of the argument from queerness. Like Mackie, Soroush argues from queerness to the systematic falsity of religious language if taken to be an objective language. Religious argument from queerness if taken together with the religious relativity argument (the formless religious pluralism) seems to be giving rise to a religious error theory.

The basis of Soroush's religious error theory is that religious language, if interpreted objectively, is systematically false, but religion could still be morally, psychologically, and socially

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[85] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-yi Ru'yaha-yi Rasulani-3 Miqraz-i Tiz-i Tanaquz [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-3 the Sharp Scissors of Contradiction]," *Jaras (Jonbish-i Rah-i Sabz)* (blog), May 9, 2013, http://www.rahesabz.net/story/75103/. The translation of this phrase is due to the courtesy of Dariush Mohammadpour.

[86] Such as Q.17: 60 and 37: 102.

[87] Mohammad Ali Ayazi, Naqd-i maqali-yi akhir-i Soroush dar guft-u-gu ba sayyid Mohmmad Ali Ayazi [The critique of the recent article of Soroush, an interview with sayyid Mohmmad Ali Ayazi], Mehr News Agency, 2013, goo.gl/nF4Hbp.

[88] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Muhammad Ravi-yi Ru'yaha-yi Rasulani-2 Khab-i Ahmad Khab-i Jumli Anbiya-St [Muhammad the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams-2 The Dream of Ahmad Is the Dream of All the Prophets]," *Jaras (Jonbish-i Rah-i Sabz)* (blog), October 7, 2013, http://www.rahesabz.net/story/72728/. I am grateful to Neil Russell for editing my translation.

beneficial, and therefore religiosity could be a reasonable practice. Moreover, the Soroushian religious error theory turns out to be not realistic. It is because it does not satisfy the epistemological component of full-fledged realism, since through religion nothing crucial can be known about the way God is, due to the systematic falsity of religious language. Even the kind of God Soroush defends (the formless God) hardly appears to be religiously relevant, since his theory of God cuts religion totally off from and independent of God, that is why it is not a kind of religious realism.

Having said all this, we already saw[89] that Soroush takes his epistemology of religion to be realistic. He takes the distinction between an object, and the knowing of an object as being central in his epistemology of religion. Therefore his epistemology of religion claims not to be anything but a realist theory since, *inter alia*, it draws a distinction between an object and knowledge of it:

> the theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge is a realist theory; i.e. it distinguishes between an object and people's conception of it, regardless of whether the conception is correct or incorrect. It is idealism that sees no distance between the mind and the world and considers the mind and the world as one and the same. The minimal condition for an epistemology to be realist is that it should distinguish between an object and knowledge of it.[90]

However, his theory of the Qur'anic revelation seems not to be meeting even the minimal requirement that Soroush himself rightly suggests for a realist theory, including a realist epistemology of religion. His theory of revelation seemingly ends up being functionally like a theory which is not realistic—or in Soroush's own terminology mentioned above an idealistic—theory of revelation or very close to it, since the distinction between God and the conception of God, even though theoretically there but practically plays no role in it.

It is because, in his theory, revelation can be explained without appealing to the God hypothesis, though—and it is an important point—not because of the non-existence of God, on the contrary exactly because of the very existence of God, a formless God. Religion is full of forms, and God is non-manifestational, and formless, therefore the Qur'anic revelation does not reflect the way God *is*, hence its systematic falsity, and thereby the independence of the Qur'anic revelation from God. Since his epistemology of religion, claims to be realistic while his theory of revelation, which Soroush claims to be based on his epistemology, turns out to be not a realistic theory then his theory of religion altogether seems not to be consistent.[91]

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[89] See Chapter Four.

[90] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-i Ti'urik-i Shari'at, Nazariyya-yi Takamul-i Ma'rifat-i Dini [The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge, a Theory of the Evolution of Religious Knowledge]* (Tehran: Sirat, 1996), 341.

[91] For a relatively similar inconsistency objection raised against Soroushian religious thought, see Hamid Vahid, "Islamic Humanism: From Silence to Extinction, a Brief Analysis of Abdulkarim Soroush's Thesis of Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," *Islam & Science* 3, no. 1 (2005) 43-56. Vahid's critique, however, is, as I said, only relatively similar to mine. Vahid argues that the epistemological theory of Soroush—that is, the theory of expansion and contraction of religious knowledge—leads to a theory which is not realistic. I disagree. First of all, as two critics of Vahid (Koosha Eghbal and Charles D. Fletcher) have convincingly shown, Vahid mis-formulated Soroush's argument—partially due to Vahid confining his discussion of Soroush exclusively to a single English article of Soroush.

6.5.2 Religious Indexical Relativism Defence

But this is not the end of story. One might defend the Soroushian theory of revelation against the inconsistency objection by arguing that his theory does not lead to a position which no longer is realistic, rather it leads to a kind of relativism (indexical relativism), which could be compatible with the theory being realistic. I think this could potentially be a rather interesting defence, and consequently worthy of addressing. It seems an interesting defence because, if successful it could preserve the main motivation behind the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation. Soroush tries to find a place, *inter alia*, for the historicity of revelation, and at the same time retains the realistic feature of revelation.

I, however, shall argue that this possible defence fails to rescue the Soroushian theory of Qur'anic revelation from the inconsistency objection. First, I shall explain what indexicals are, then I characterise general indexical relativism, as well as religious indexical relativism, and how it might be used to preserve the alleged realist component of Soroushian theory of revelation, and finally I shall argue how it fails to do so.

Indexicals are linguistic expressions whose content depend on the context of use. The paradigmatic examples of indexicals are 'I', 'here', 'today', 'yesterday', and 'that'. The truth and falsity of these expressions are not absolute, that is they are context-independent. It is because the reference of indexicals may differ from a context to another. When I say, for instance, 'I am student' and my university professor says 'I am not student' my professor, and I would not be expressing contradictory claims, even though it superficially may appear so; because we would not be engaged in affirming or denying the same proposition, due to the different referent of 'I' with context of use.[92]

And secondly because Vahid seems to be unjustifiably conflating two things: conflating 1. the specific theological position of Soroush (the formless God)—which I agree with Vahid seems susceptible in making the Soroushian theory of revelation lapsing into a theory which is not realistic, or very close to it, and therefore inconsistent (hence the similarity of my critique and that of Vahid)—with 2. The Soroushian epistemology of religion which could still be taken to be realistic. It is true that for Soroush religious knowledge is inescapably age-bound—the point that Vahid highlights in Soroushian epistemology is to conclude that Soroushian epistemology ends up being far from being realistic—but for Soroush not all ways of religious understanding are equally true or false, or even defensible or indefensible at each age. Therefore, in Soroushian epistemology approximate or indexical truth is still preserved, in principle, for some theories versus others at each age. In order for the epistemology of religion suggested by Soroush to remain at least minimally realistic, this much seems enough, since it is not totally cut off from reality. For a concise critique of Vahid's critique of Soroushian epistemology, see Charles D. Fletcher, "The Methodology of Abdolkarim Soroush: A Preliminary Study," *Islamic Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 547–8. For a more detailed and philosophically nuanced critique of Vahid's critique, see Koosha Eghbal, "Naqdi Bar Maqali-yi Insangirayi Islami az Faraz ta Furud [A Critique of the Article 'Islamic Humanism: From Silence to Extinction']," *The Official Website of Abdolkarim Soroush*, 2005, http://www.drsoroush.com/Persian/On_DrSoroush/P-CMO-13840129-Naghdy.html.

[92] David Braun, "Indexicals," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/indexicals/; Carol Rovane, *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 36–7.

Indexical relativists, generally speaking, claim that not only indexical pronouns, such as 'I', 'He', and 'they', as well as indexical adverbs such as 'here', 'now', and 'tomorrow' are such that truth or falsity of their content depends on the context of use, but actually also all sentences behave like indexical sentences (global indexical relativism), or at least in some domains, such as morality or art, this holds true (local indexical relativism).

For example, moral indexical relativists hold that 'moral sentences exhibit the kind of context-dependence also exhibited by indexical sentences.'[93] To take just one example, when someone says 'you should not cheat in an exam' from the moral indexical relativist point of view it means at least either of these two things: either 1- given the moral code one is committed to you should not cheat in an exam (this is what, I think, can be called communal moral indexical relativism), or 2- given the affective attitudes of the speaker in the context, which might or might not be shared by the moral code of the society in which the speaker mostly lives, you should not cheat in an exam (this is what, I think, can be called individual moral indexical relativism).[94]

In his discussion of religious pluralism Soroush makes a few remarks which can be taken as showing affinity with what can be called 'religious indexical relativism':

> the truth of religions is very similar to the truth of indexical propositions. The truth and veracity of such propositions depends on who says them and in what context. [...] Now, "for Christians, Christianity was true until the advent of Islam" is true for Muslims. "For Jews, Judaism was true until the advent of Christianity" is true for Christians and Muslims. This kind of truth is by no means the same as scientific or philosophical truths, [...] the question of truth and falsehood for religions is different from the absolute and intrinsic truth and falsehood of whether the atom exists or it doesn't.[95]

From the above remarks I gather that Soroush seems to be defending the local communal religious indexical relativism, rather than its universal or individual version, since he uses the plural Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

Now, let us see how one might argue that the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation would be better understood if taken as indexically relativistic religious realism, rather than turning out to be a theory which is not realistic. The defence could go like this: unlike what the inconsistency objection claims, the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation is not cut off from the divine reality, rather its relation to it is indexical. Just like the relationship of the adverb 'here' and the context in which it is referring to the place in which it is uttered, revelatory language is contextual, and therefore it is not true or false *tout court*, rather it is true or false indexically.

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[93] Max Kölbel, "Indexical Relativism Versus Genuine Relativism," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, no. 3 (2004): 3001.

[94] For what is now a classical defence of individual moral indexical relativism, see James Dreier, "Internalism and Speaker Relativism," *Ethics* 101, no. 1 (1990): 6–26.

[95] Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience,* 166. See also pages 167 and 171.

To illustrate, 'God is absolutely one' is indexically true for Muslims, while 'God is three in one' is indexically true for Christians, despite the superficial contradiction of the two expressions. In this way, revelatory language is not cut off from the divine reality, but due to the indexical nature of this language, the socio-political and cultural context in which it is uttered is imbedded into its epistemic assessment, since it is true or false given the context in which it is used. In this way Soroushian theory remains realistic because it satisfies all three components of full-fledged realism: it is directed towards an independent reality, it is truth apt, and we can know that it is indexically true.

6.5.3 The Critique of Religious Indexical Relativism Defence

Here—which, by the way, itself is an indexical—I am not going to get engaged in the critique of indexical relativism as such. If only for the sake of argument, I assume that indexical relativism can withstand criticisms raised against it, and can come out as a viable position.[96] My argument, instead, is that even if for the sake of argument indexical relativism would be defensible, key religious terms, such as God, salvation and so one seem not to be like indexicals. Put it another way, even if generally indexical relativism is defensible specifically religious indexical relativism is not.

I already mentioned some typical examples of indexicals such as 'here' and 'I'. There is almost no disagreement among philosophers about these paradigmatic examples being indexical. But a serious disagreement arises when some theorists argue that the list of indexicals go far beyond these typical examples. They argue that these types of expression are also context sensitive, and therefore they are instances of indexicals: sentences containing verbs in the present tense (such as 'John *is* thirsty'), modals (such as 'John *might* have been in London'), gradable adjectives (such as 'John is *tall*', some adjective and nouns, such as 'late', 'ready', 'neighbour', and 'enemy' (such as 'John is *ready* to go out'), and even knowledge attribution (such as 'John *knows* where to find a cash machine').[97] Other theorists, however, tend to confine the list of indexicals to the paradigmatic examples such as 'here' and 'I', showing that other examples (such as modals and gradable adjectives mentioned above) are context-*in*sensitive. As I explained, Soroush seems to be among those who tend to expand the list of indexicals. He goes even further adding key religious terms such as 'God' and 'salvation' to the list of indexicals.

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[96] For a critique of indexical relativism, see Max Kölbel, *Truth Without Objectivity* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), Ch 3. For a defense of modified version of indexical relativism, see Carlo Filotico, "Weak Indexical Relativism," in *New Frontiers in Truth*, ed. Fabio Bacchini, Massimo Dell'Utri, and Stefano Caputo (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 63–79.

[97] Braun, "Indexicals."

Some philosophers, however, have suggested some tests to enable us to adjudicate between the long list of candidates for indexicals. These tests help us to see which is a good candidate for indexicality, and which is not. Let us consider one of these tests, and to work out whether the religious indexical relativism of Soroush can pass this test.

> A suggested test for indexicality:
> Expression E in sentence F is indexical if E is context-sensitive, and E is context-sensitive if the occurrence of E in sentence F tends to resist (i.e. renders it false) 'Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports Test'.

'Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports Test' might seem mouthful and confusing; I shall explain it just now—by the way, 'now' is another non-controversial case of indexicals!

This test is designed to show that when one utters a truly indexical expression in a sentence (such as when John says 'I am thirsty'), if someone else reports this sentence in a disquotational way (such as when Joe says: 'John said I am thirsty') then the occurrence of this expression resists disquotational indirect report (i.e. renders it a false report). The report is rendered false because the context of disquotational indirect report differs from the context in which the indexical is initially uttered, and since indexicals are context-sensitive they therefore resist Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports Test. To see this point,

> (context 1) John says: 'I am thirsty'.
> (Inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of context 1) 'John said I am thirsty'.

As you see, since 'I' is truly an indexical, it resists inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports in a way that the disquotational report renders it false.

By passing this test, 'I', then, is a non-controversial case of indexicals. Let us call this test 1. Let us now put a controversial candidate for indexicality under the same test. Let me put 'ready', which is a controversial candidate for indexicality, under this test. Let us call it test 2.

> (context 1) Lucy is about to leave the apartment and she says 'John is ready'.
> (context 2) Lucy who was just talking over the phone by John says 'John is ready'.

Now, let use see what will happen to their inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports:

> (Inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of the context 1) 'Lucy said John is ready'.
> (Inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of the context 2) 'Lucy said John is ready'.

Unlike test 1, in test 2 both disquotational indirect reports are true, so it has not resisted disquotational indirect report. Therefore, 'ready' does not pass Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports Test, and consequently 'ready' seems not to be an indexical.[98]

Now, the question is whether 'God' and other key religious terms is like 'I' or like 'ready', namely whether 'God' is indexical or pseudo-indexical. More generally, the question is whether religious indexical relativism passes Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports Test or not. Now, I shall argue that 'God' is not indexical. Now, let us put 'God' under this test. Let us consider 'God is omnipotent' in different contexts:

(context 1) When Christians say 'God is omnipotent'.
(context 2) When Jews say 'God is omnipotent'.
(context 3) When Muslims say 'God is omnipotent'.

Now, let us consider the inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of 'God is omnipotent':

(Inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of the context 1—when uttered by a non-Christian) 'Christians say God is omnipotent'.
(Inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of the context 2—when uttered by a non-Jew) 'Jews say God is omnipotent'.
(Inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of the context 3—when uttered by a non-Muslim) 'Muslims say God is omnipotent'.

Inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of 'God is omnipotent' are all true. But given the Inter-Contextual Disquotational Indirect Reports Test, if 'God' is an indexical then Inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports of 'God is omnipotent' should be rendered false. Hence, 'God' is not indexical.

If 'God' as, probably, the most important religious key term in the Abrahamic religions is not indexical, then religious indexical relativism is not defeasible. Consequently, religious indexical relativism defence is doomed to failure. And if religious indexical relativism defence is doomed to failure, the inconsistency objection against the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation still remains in its place.

[98] Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore, *Insensitive Semantic: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 87–91.

6.6 Summary and Conclusion

The Soroushian theory of revelation is an approval theory of Muslim revelation. It is not, unlike what might initially appear, a denial theory of revelation such as the one suggested by Zakariyya' al-Razi. Among approval theories of Muslims revelation, the Soroushian theory belongs to the most radical spectrum of internalist, and not externalist, theories of revelation. Soroushian theory in terms of its place in the realism–irrealism debate in contemporary philosophy belongs to a hybrid position between realism and irrealism. But despite its claim to be at least minimally realistic, the theory eventually laps into not being even minimally realistic, and therefore it seems inconsistent. The best defence of the theory against inconsistency objection, which I called religious indexical relativism defence, seems not to be working.

It is worth mentioning that by critiquing the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation, and specially by raising the inconsistency objection, I have not advocated any specific theory of divine revelation (realist, non- or anti-realist, internalist, externalist, etc.). All I am saying is that the theory under discussion seems in the last analysis inconsistent. Whether or not this inconsistency could be resolved, and if so whether it should be resolved in favour of (direct or indirect) realism, or in favour of anti-realism or non-realism, or in favour of internalist or externalist theory of revelation goes well beyond my task in this research.

My task in this research was only the philosophical critique of the Soroushian theory of revelation, and not its possible reconstruction. Having said that, I will make some suggestions for further research programs on the philosophical analysis of (Qur'anic) divine revelation in the next chapter, which will be the concluding chapter of this research.

7 Conclusion:
The Future of Philosophical Study of Divine Revelation

We have reached the last step of our intellectual journey. In this concluding chapter after summing up the main themes of this research I will be suggesting some further research programs for the philosophical study of (the Qur'anic) divine revelation. I think pursuing these suggestions can enrich the future of philosophical study of divine revelation, especially as related to the Qur'an.

7.1 The Main Themes of the Research

This research has been dealing with the problems of the Qur'anic revelation in modern Muslim theology in general, and specifically how they are dealt with by Abdolkarim Soroush, the protagonist of this research. The research intends to critically evaluate the contribution of Soroush to this thorny and controversial debate.

But first of all, what are the problems of revelation? How could God, who is by definition transcendent, and therefore, at least according to one interpretation, by no means bears human features, speak in a human form, i.e. with words? This is the first problem of revelation. How could some phrases of the Qur'an, whose at least superficial meanings seem unacceptable to at least the modern mind (such as a verse whose superficial meaning gives advice to men to beat their wives under certain circumstances),[1] could be taken to be the speech of an omniscient and omnibenevolent God? This is the second problem of revelation. These are the main problems of divine revelation by which Muslim theologians, philosophers, mystics, and intellectuals have been baffled—by the first problem from the early centuries of Islam onwards, and by the second problem from at least 18th century onwards.

In order to address these problems a taxonomy of Muslim theories of revelation was suggested. According to this taxonomy the theories of revelation in Muslim context could be divided into denial versus approval theories of revelation. The denial theories explain the phenomenon of revelation thoroughly naturalistically, i.e. without appealing to the God hypothesis, either because they do not believe that God exists, or because they think that though a kind of God exists, God does not reveal Him/Her/Itself in the scriptural forms and does not sent prophets.

[1] The Qur'an, 4: 34.

Denial theorists also clearly pass negative value judgments on the roles historically revealed religions played. Zakariyya' al-Razi was singled out as a denial theorist of revelation.

Approval theories of revelation are theories that in one way or another appeal to the God hypothesis to explain the phenomenon of revelation and/or pass positive value judgments on the historical roles of revealed religions. Approval theories of revelation can be further divided into internalist and externalist theories. According to the externalist theories of revelation God, or in addition angels, are solely responsible in shaping the content and form of the Qur'an. The possibility of agency for prophets, or by extension the culture in which the prophets would live, is thereby ruled out.

The main externalist theories of revelation, which were discussed, are the theories of Ibn Hanbal and al-Ash'ari. Internalist or semi-internalist theories of revelation leave open, at least in principle, the possibility of agency for prophets, and by extension the culture in which the prophets would live, in shaping the form and/or content of the scripture. Al-Marisi, some Ash'aris such as Fakhr al-Razi, Mu'ammar, al-Farabi, al-Sijistani, Ibn al-'Arabi, Fazlur Rahman and Shabestari, in one way or another, were categorised as internalist of semi-internalist theorists of divine revelation.

The main objective of this research is to philosophically critique the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation. In order to achieve this aim specifically, I dwelt on the significant philosophical debate on realism-irrealism, to which a chapter was devoted. Based on the taxonomy, I suggested in this research the religious realism-irrealism debate can be divided into three main positions: realism, irrealism, and a hybrid position. Religious realists take God to be independent of us and objective (ontological component of realism). They also take our talk of God or the ultimate reality as being truth apt, i.e. in principle capable of being true or false (semantic component of realism). Realists finally maintain that at least some of our judgments about God can be known to be (approximately) true (epistemological component of realism).

Irrealism, in our taxonomy, comes in two forms: anti-realism and non-realism. Antirealists share this position with realists that religious language is truth apt. But they take religious language to be either a kind of language whose truth or falsity cannot be known (epistemological antirealism) or its systematic falsity is known (ontological antirealism). The positions of Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Feuerbach, Emile Durkheim, and Richard Dawkins as to religion can be labelled as ontological anti-realism. Epistemological anti-realism, which is primarily an agnostic position, can be further divided into weak agnosticism versus strong agnosticism. Strong agnostics think that knowing whether or not God exists is in principle unknowable. Weak agnostics think while God's existence is in principle knowable the debate over God's existence has so far not been stablished in favour of either theism or atheism. Unlike both realists and antirealists, non-realists do not take religious

language to be truth apt. For them religion is not supposed to describe objective reality. Wittgenstein, D. Z. Phillips, and Don Cupitt are usually taken to be religious non-realist (though the last one undeniably so and the first two arguably so).

Religious realism can be further divided into direct realism versus indirect realism. Both direct and indirect versions of realism agree, in principle, on all three components of realism (ontological, semantic, and epistemological). They disagree, however, on some semantic and epistemological details. While for direct realists literal talk of God and unmediated knowledge of God are possible, for indirect realists, God could mainly or thoroughly be talked about metaphorically, and could be known in a mediated way (through languages, cultures, rites, theories and so on). William Alston was a very prominent representative of religious direct realism. Alister McGrath is a good example of religious indirect realist.

A hybrid position is an amalgamation of some elements of realism and irrealism. When it comes to the very existence of God or ultimate reality a theorist of hybrid position is realist. He/she takes God to be independent of us (ontological component), and religious language is truth apt at least as far as it talks about the very existence of God (minimal semantic component), and we are capable of knowing at least the very existence of God (minimal epistemological component). But when it comes to the attributes of God, a theorist of hybrid position is non-realist in the sense that for him/her these attributes are not true or false, but they are either morally and existentially useful or not. John Hick can be taken as a prominent theoretician of a hybrid position.

In order to address philosophically the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation we first needed to make sense of the theoretical foundations upon which he bases his theory. Soroush, as a liberal Muslim reformer, has built his theory of the Qur'anic revelation on his epistemology of religion, as well as his theory of God and prophecy. The Soroushian epistemology of religion, which is called 'the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge', argues that religious knowledge is different from religion *per se*. Even if religion, by definition, is divine, sacred, complete, and unchangeable, religious knowledge does not bear these characteristics; rather, it is human, historical, provisional, collective, flowing, fallible, and revisable. This paves the way for Soroush to justify his effort to come up with radically different theories of God, prophecy, and divine revelation.

Soroush, however, does not stop there, the next step for him is to elaborate his own theory of religion (in particular his theory of God, prophecy and divine revelation). He analyses the core of religion (especially Islam) in terms of religious experience. He takes religious experience to be ubiquitous and not confined to only prophets. Moreover, he argues that it lies at the very core of

experience that it is not fixed, rather experience has its ups and down due to the ups and downs of the personality, and the contingent historical events occurring to the owner of the experience.

Therefore, the religious experience of Muhammad that constitutes the nucleus of Islamic prophecy and revelation was subject to psychological and historical contractions and expansions reflected in the Qur'an. He calls his theory of religion 'the expansion of prophetic experience', by which he means not only the expansion but also the contraction of prophetic experience which is done by philosophers, mystics, theologians, exegetes, and intellectuals. This means they have added (expanded) significantly to the experience of Muhammad (like Sufis who added, for instance, *sama'* or mystical dance to Muslim rituals) but also they downplayed or even put totally aside (contracted) some aspects of Muhammad experience (such as putting totally aside Jihad in some peaceful readings of Islam).

After all this, we considered the Soroushian theory of Qur'anic revelation. His theory of revelation has so far undergone two different, though compatible and seemingly completing, phases. In the first phase his emphasis was on the Qur'an being in both form and content Muhammadan speech, and only in the metaphorical and not literal sense, God's speech. In the second phase of his theory he focuses on the phenomenological nature of Muhammadan speech. He argues that Muhammadan speech phenomenologically bears the imagination nature. Muhammad's power of imagination and dream, which despite its richness is historically conditioned, put forms on God who is in principle beyond any form.

Based on all these discussions (the categorisation of Muslim theories of revelation, and the realism-irrealism debate, as well as the Soroushian theoretical foundations, and his own theory of the Qur'anic revelation) we can now classify the Soroushian theory of Qur'anic revelation. His theory seems to be a radical version of internalist theory of revelation, due to the fact that he puts full emphasis on the agency of the prophet in shaping the Qur'anic revelation. His theory is also a hybrid theory, since it at least tries to stand somewhere between realism and irrealism. But as I argued in the last analysis it ends up lapsing into irrealism, since though the Qur'anic language according to Soroush would be systematically false, it is morally and existentially a useful phenomenon, therefore just like irrealism, religion stands on its own, either because it is not truth apt or because its falsity does not have a detrimental effect on its credibility.

Since Soroushian epistemology of religion, upon which, he claims, his theory of revelation is based, would be realistic, his overall theory of religion amounts to an inconsistent position. An effort to meet the inconsistency objection, it was argued, failed. According to this effort religious language could be interpreted as both relativistic, and at the same time realistic. The key to bridge the gap between relativism and realism was indexicality. But this effort failed because a suggested

test showed that religious key terms such as 'God' cannot be taken to be indexical. Therefore, the inconsistency objection levelled against the Soroushian theory of revelation still stands in its place.

7.2 Suggestions for Further Research Programs

The future of philosophical study of (the Qur'anic) divine revelation could be enriched if a number of further research programs would be planned. In what follows I shall suggest some of these programs.

Before a proper philosophical study of the Qur'anic revelation, naturally comes a meticulous historical study of Muslim theories of the Qur'anic revelation; and as I suggested before,[2] such a comprehensive history needs yet to be written. Moreover, the field of philosophical study of the Qur'anic revelation is still in its infancy, if not non-existent. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter of this research even the philosophical study of Jewish and Christian revelation are also young fields, let alone the comparative philosophical study of Abrahamic revelations.[3] The objective of making some suggestions for a further research programme is, therefore, to make a contribution to the future plan for the flourishing of a philosophical study of divine revelation, specifically philosophical study of the Qur'anic revelation.

We already saw that the hybrid position of Soroush with regards to realism-irrealism debate tends to be finally falling into irrealism, and does not remain faithful to its claimed minimal realism. We already categorised John Hick's position as a hybrid position as well. The fact that the critique similar to the one I raised against Soroush has also been levelled against Hick's hybrid position—to the effect that Hick's position also laps into irrealism—[4] shows that those who have sympathy with a hybrid position, including Soroush himself, need to further defend their position against inconsistency objection.

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[2] See Chapter Two, Introduction.

[3] 'Since the nineteenth century and the development of the scholarly, non-theological study of religions, the comparative study of the Abrahamic religions has not been pursued either intensively or systematically, and it is only very recently that the comparative study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has picked up in earnest.' Adam Silverstein, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Moshe Blidstein, eds., "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), xiii. What the editors of this valuable handbook say about the scarcity of the academic study of general comparative study of Abraham religions is even more true when it comes specifically to the comparative philosophical study of Abrahamic revelations. Having said that, for a short edited volume to be published soon (by the end of 2018) in this regards, see Georges Tamer, ed., *The Concept of Revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming). For a philosophically nuanced comparative theology of revelation from a Christian perspective, see Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[4] See, e.g. Paul R. Eddy, "Religious Pluralism and the Divine: Another Look at John Hick's Neo-Kantian Proposal," *Religious Studies* 30, no. 4 (1994): 467–78; William P. Alston, "Realism and the Christian Faith," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38, no. 1/3 (1995): 37–60; Christopher J. Insole, *The Realist Hope: A Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophical Theology* (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), Ch 7. For the response of John Hick to Paul Eddy's critique, see John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and the Divine: A Response to Paul Eddy," *Religious Studies* 31, no. 4 (1995): 417–20.

But at the same time the main motivations behind the Soroushian theory of revelation (and probably that of Hick for that matter) seem highly plausible—given the plausibility of theism. These motivations are to retain the transcendence of God, and also to explain the historicity of religion. Now, the thorny question is: Is it possible to not compromise God's transcendence and at the same time be able to explain the historicity of religion, while remaining faithful to the full-fledged or at least minimal realism? That seems at least initially like an impossible mission. But to further investigate whether and to what extent this mission could be possible seems a fruitful further research program in the philosophical study of (the Qur'anic) divine revelation.[5]

The second further research program that seems to be needed is concerning the problem of an impersonal God. As we saw, what specifically makes the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation susceptible to irrealism, and hence makes it inconsistent is his impersonal theology which appears to finally cut the explanation of religion totally off from the God hypothesis. But, let us assume for the sake of argument that an impersonal God could be at least in a very minimal sense related to the explanation of religion. From a realistic standpoint within the Abrahamic religious traditions, it is still far from clear how such an impersonal God could be taken as a religiously adequate God. Such an impersonal God needs to respond to people's petitionary prayers and communicate with them, *inter alia*, through revelation.

Both petitionary prayer and special revelation seemingly require God to be personal, since God has to have will in order to communicate with human beings,[6] and only a person or a person-like entity can have will. Such an impersonal God lacks will, and thus lacks the capability for communication. Moreover, those who take God to be impersonal usually take God to be so because they hold that God is timeless rather than everlasting (temporally eternal).

Some philosophers have argued that a timeless God cannot act in the world, and if God cannot act in the world then given the realistic interpretation of the Abrahamic religious traditions the timeless conception of God is not religiously adequate. But why can a timeless God not act in the world? It is argued that in order for God to act in the temporal world, God would have to have the knowledge of events in the past, present, and future. Since a timeless God in principle lacks such a knowledge then God cannot act in the world.[7] The timeless model of God has more or less

[5] For two seemingly failed efforts along this difficult line, see Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2003); K. Johannesson, *God Pro Nobis: On Non-Metaphysical Realism and the Philosophy of Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007). These efforts both seem to be failing because they try to defend a version of realism that is too minimal, to such an extent that they are free from a metaphysical component. Such a minimal realism is far from a full-fledge realism, while a version of realism putting metaphysical component aside could hardly make itself immune from lapsing into a kind of irrealism which does not do justice to religion language.

[6] Arnold Charles Moon, "The Concept of Revelation" (Ph.D. dissertation, Open University, 1983), 5.

[7] Dean Lubin, "Can a Timeless God Act in the World?" *Open Journal of Philosophy* 06 (2016): 29–35.

gone out of favour in contemporary philosophy.[8] Those, like Soroush, who seem to be inclined to a timeless God owe us an explanation as to how a timeless conception of God could be religiously adequate.

We have reached the end of our intellectual journey. I humbly invite you to think of this question—you can take it as a further thinking programme: If God's speaking through words would compromise God's transcendence how could God speak *without* words? And if God's speaking through words would *not* compromise God's transcendence given the historicity of God's speech, as Kierkegaard puts it, 'is it possible to base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge?'[9]

[8] For a ground-breaking critique of timeless God, see R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). In the concluding chapter of this book the author calls for further work on the Scripture's position on a timeless God, suggesting that 'there is no hint of divine timelessness in the Christian scriptures' (p 199). The same further research program is needed to be done on the Qur'an.

[9] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*, trans. Howard V Hong and David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), III.

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